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Expanding the Bounds of Critique: Kant, Benjamin and the Coming Philosophy

Galen Albert McRury Crout

Expanding the Bounds of Critique: Kant, Benjamin and the Coming Philosophy

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Galen Crout

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CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Supervisor

Dr. Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu

Examiners

Dr. Nandita Biswas-Mellamphy

Dr. Paul Coates

Dr. Steve Lofts

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Galen Albert McRury Crout

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ABSTRACT

This project attempts to trace a continuity which runs from Walter Benjamin's early writings on language and the coming philosophy through to his *Arcades Project*. Benjamin's early writings on the Kantian critical system stipulate the need to bring the clarity and consistency of the critical system into relation with time, ephemera and history. This project argues that Benjamin's early demands are developed via his encounter with the literary techniques of surrealism and the artistic techniques of Baudelaire's Monsieur G. Ultimately, this work contends that Benjamin's *Arcades Project* attempts to synthesize both the techniques developed in Benjamin's middle period and the goals put forward in his early writings.

Keywords: Benjamin, Kant, Aragon, Baudelaire, critique, Arcades Project, surrealism, messianism, angel of history, reason, knowledge, experience, judgement, post-humanism.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AJ	*Art of Judgement.*
AK	Theodor Adorno, *Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason."*
BG	*Benjamin's Ghosts:*
CC	*The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*
CCK	*The Cambridge Companion to Kant*
Corr	*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910 - 1940*
CE	*Walter Benjamin: the Colour of Experience*
DS	*The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*
DSS	"Dialectics at a Standstill."
K	Paul Guyer, *Kant*
MR	*The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time.*
MS	"Manifesto of Surrealism"
MT	*Modernism and Time*
Na	*Nadja*
PB	"A Portrait of Walter Benjamin."
PM	"The Painter of Modern Life."

PP	*Paris Peasant.*
SW1	Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 1*
SW2.1	Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 2.1*
SW2.2	Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 2.2*
SW3	Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 3*
SW4	Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4*
TF	*Tigersprung Fashion in Modernity*
WBAC	*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change*

Introduction

This thesis argues that Walter Benjamin's historical materialism can be rightfully interpreted as the culmination of his most coherent and productive early writings – "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" (1916) and "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918). Benjamin's writings are famous for both their scope and their unconventional fragmentary and essayistic style. In contrast to the overwhelming majority of philosophers, whose contributions to the history of philosophy can be localized in one or several *magnum opuses*, Benjamin tends to favour modes of expression which fall outside the purview of conventional academic writings. His sprawling literary and philosophical corpus, which also includes personal correspondences, doctoral dissertations, dialogues, reviews and radio programmes, leaves interpreters to orient themselves within the ambiguous coordinates of a legacy which shirks localization. His monumental *Arcades Project*, which shares the *physical presence* of many of the great works of the philosophical tradition, departs from the analogy in its well documented status as an unfinished project which might never have been intended for publication.

Benjamin's intellectual influences, which can only in part reveal themselves in his correspondences and citations, are at least as diverse as his productions. In Benjamin's brief life he found himself in the company of the foremost representatives of the Marburg school of neo-Kantian interpretation, several of Husserl's most prominent students, and the French surrealists. He kept close personal correspondences with many of the great European intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, including the leading figures of the Frankfurt school, Zionist theologians, poets, and Nazi political philosophers.

Benjamin's letters suggest periods of undivided attention to the study of the history of Catholic dogma, and his *Habilitationsschrift* concerns a literary form – the German Mourning Play – which had been virtually lost to the tradition of modern philology before his engagement with it. Benjamin's famous rejection from the German academic establishment in 1925 absolved him of the disciplinary strictures of conventional academic research, but also absolved him of the academic responsibility of clarifying the range of his influences. Benjamin's writings are both obscure in their origins and transdisciplinary, or even undisciplinary, in their execution. Consequently, it is a daunting task to begin to parse through his writings to unearth the formative influences and antagonists which foreground and resurface throughout his work.

We have been lucky enough to embark upon the project in the wake of several decisive recent interventions in the field of Benjamin scholarship. In contradistinction from the great majority of Benjamin scholarship of the past thirty years, which pays disproportionate emphasis to Benjamin's later writings, several recent scholars, notably Peter Fenves (2011) and Howard Caygill (1998), have attempted to demonstrate the rigorous and compelling structure of Benjamin's often fragmentary early works. Their efforts, including several translations of important minor works, have endowed Benjamin scholarship with a compelling new orientation towards his writings as a whole. Their research elaborates the extent to which Kantian idealism and German phenomenology figure into Benjamin's early reflections on language and colour. In Fenves' *The Messianic Reduction* Fenves suggests that Benjamin's conceptions of experience can be interpreted as an attempt to enrich the phenomenological reduction to the natural attitude with a messianic injunction toward ceaseless purification through considerations of culture and history (MR; 3). Likewise, Caygill suggests in his 1998 work *The Colour of Experience* that Benjamin's early writings can

be understood as a "'comprehension and recasting' of Kant's transcendental concept of experience into a speculative one" (CE; 1). This is accomplished, according to Caygill, through Benjamin's challenge to Kant's conception of the forms of intuition. Benjamin, according to Caygill, attempts to replace "Kant's forms of intuition (space and time) with colour as a (transitive and shifting) medium of intuition" (CE; 82).

Despite their laudable accomplishments, Caygill and Fenves tend to refrain from an elaboration of their research into an interpretation of Benjamin's later writings, barring several notable exceptions, including Caygill's attempts to account for Benjamin's 'city diaries.' Instead, Caygill and Fenves for the most part limit themselves to Benjamin's writings before the mid 1920s. Consequently, there remain many potential avenues through which to explore the persistent elements of Benjamin's early essays in his later works.

This thesis develops one such line of inquiry. It attempts to show the development of a trajectory in Benjamin's writings that begins with his early encounter with Kant and ends with the intentions and methodologies which foreground the *Arcades Project.* Along the way the argument develops the suggestion that Benjamin's middle period engagements with surrealism and the historical question of Paris in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are a transitional elaboration, a partial fulfilment, of the task for philosophy set out in his early writings.

More explicitly, the first chapter of this project attempts to develop a sense of both the intention and the underlying theoretical consistency of Benjamin's early writings. Benjamin's early writings are littered with indications of his estimation of Kant above almost any other figure in intellectual history. Of Kant's many virtues, main one Benjamin identifies is his unprecedented pursuit of clarity and justification as the end, instead of the means, of philosophy. Kant inaugurates the systematic tradition of German idealism, and in

many ways remains its most perfect example. His demand for a rigorous theory of transcendental knowledge was unrelenting. Yet Benjamin maintains that Kant falls short of accounting for the claim of ephemeral experience in his work. His formulation of the transcendental consciousness might be adequate to the time and space of mechanistic Enlightenment experience, but it is inadequate to religious or historical experience before or after Kant. Consequently, while Kant's transcendental philosophy is preeminent in the tradition, it remains insufficient. Having established the tension between Kant and Benjamin, the chapter goes on to develop Benjamin's approach to the resolution of the question of the insufficiency of Kant's theory of knowledge. This is developed through Benjamin's attempt to articulate the speculative structure that perfect knowledge would have, while making explicit the theological and philosophical obstructions which bar its fulfilment. Benjamin's response to Kant in his essay on language and his essay on the coming philosophy produces a curious orientation for the philosopher. He is poised between his obligation to the pursuit of clear and justified knowledge of the world, but he is conscious of the ultimate insufficiency of his capacities. Benjamin's early philosophy attempts to rectify the shortcomings of Kant's transcendental subject, but the result is a philosophical system that is always already outside of itself.

The second chapter of this thesis attempts to extend the analyses of the first chapter into an interpretation of Benjamin's varied writings from the 1920s and 30s. The chapter begins with an account of Charles Baudelaire's famous modernist essay "The Painter of Modern Life." Baudelaire's account of fashion and beauty concentrates the figure of 'ephemeral experience,' which for Benjamin bars the fulfilment of the Kantian project. Baudelaire's essay is as much an articulation of the character of modern life—modern life as ephemeral experience—as it is a preliminary attempt to develop a method of knowing

which is appropriate to such experience. Thus it promises an initial strategy that Benjamin might employ to reconcile his early demand for a rigorous purification of the theory of knowledge with his recognition of the ephemeral. The chapter proceeds to uncover the tradition of surrealist writing which emerges in the image of Baudelaire. Benjamin spent a considerable amount of time in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, and exchanged extensive correspondences with the surrealists. His correspondences suggest that Benjamin felt an immense intellectual kinship with their early efforts. The most famous literary productions of the surrealists involve the translation of the artistic methods of recording the ephemeral which Baudelaire outlines in his "The Painter of Modern Life" into a literary idiom. The surrealists move the content of nineteenth century lithographs into twentieth century "magical experiments with words," to quote Benjamin's description of their writings in 1929. These diverse figures came to influence Benjamin's productive philosophical development. They promised a means toward the beginning of the task of translating ephemeral experience into knowledge. The essay concludes with the suggestion that many of Benjamin's writings from the early 1930s, including "On Unpacking my Library" and "One Way Street," can be understood as attempts to re-appropriate the techniques of Baudelaire and the surrealists in the service of Benjamin's early project.

The third chapter of the project, which serves in a way as its conclusion, seeks to situate the culmination of Benjamin's early and middle period writings in the question of the infinite task in relation to Benjamin's *Arcades Project.* As intimated above, Benjamin's early essays outline the obligations of the philosopher in the present, but simultaneously disavow the possibility of any immediately available fulfilment of her work. Nonetheless, Benjamin's essays do not preclude such a possibility from all future eventualities. It is important to note that the essay "On the Coming Philosophy" is *not* an essay "On the *Impossible* Philosophy."

This chapter develops an account of the robust theological structures which accompany Benjamin's philosophical development, namely the weak messianism which attains its most concerted expression in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such" and, much later, in the "Theses on the Concept of History." By interpreting the figure of *Angelus Novus* as a symbolic representation of the historical materialist—located somewhere between the divine and the profane—and situating it in relation to Benjamin's weak messianism, we conclude that the *Arcades Project* is the trace remainder of a process which continues uncompleted until the time of its theological resolution.

Chapter 1: The Kantian Roots of the Coming Philosophy

1.1 ON BENJAMIN AND THE KANTIAN CRITIQUE

The object of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for a unique reinterpretation of Benjamin's later writings, namely his work on surrealism and his *Arcades Project*, via a consideration of the tension evinced in Benjamin's early writings between his encounter with the timelessness of the Kantian critical philosophy and his own theory of spiritual immanence, a theory which attempts to extend the scope of experience treated by Kant to the domain of new regions of religious or historical experience.

Benjamin's *oeuvre* is often characterized as fragmentary and essayistic. Norbert Bolz writes in "Aesthetics? Philosophy of History? Theology!", his recent essay on Benjamin, anthologized in Gerhard Richter's *Benjamin's Ghosts*, that Benjamin's writings comprise an anti-theory of sorts, a body of work which is fragmentary instead of total, immanent instead of mediated, in the legacy of Romantics such as Friederich Schlegel. Bolz writes that "instead of the system, [Benjamin provides] just an "attempt"; instead of philosophy, just literary scholarship; instead of world mystery, just conjectures" (BG, 227). The immanent quality of Benjamin's writings, as well as his emphasis on the latent *spiritual* [geistig] dimensions of experience lends credibility to Bolz's interpretation. Likewise, Benjamin's reticence to engage in systematic philosophizing, his preference for critical literary genres, and the uncompleted quality of his writings bolster this interpretive gesture.

Yet despite compelling evidence, Benjamin's early writings contain many suggestions that he is much closer to the systematic critical philosophy of the neo-Kantians and

phenomenologists than the majority of recent reflections on his legacy maintain. In a letter to Gerhard [Gershom] Scholem from October 22nd, 1917, Benjamin writes that

> Although I still have no proof of this, it is my firm belief that, in keeping with the spirit of philosophy and thus of doctrine to which it belongs (that is, if it does not perhaps constitute doctrine in its entirety), there will never be any question of the Kantian system's being shaken and toppled. Rather, the question is much more one of the system's being set in granite and universally developed. (Corr, 97)

Likewise, in his 1918 work "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" Benjamin maintains that "[i]t is of the greatest importance for the philosophy of the future to recognize and sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected" (SW1, 101 - 102). What Benjamin hopes to adopt and cultivate is never in fact made explicit in his various publications, but these statements suggest that there is a more extensive dialogue between Benjamin's philosophy of immanence and the critical structure of the Kantian philosophy. It is left to us as interpreters to address the tension between critique and immanence in Benjamin's writing.

But what is this thing called critique and why should it concern us? We can begin by asking what qualities of the Kantian critical philosophy might have appealed to Benjamin. What might have driven Benjamin to view the critical philosophy as the groundwork, or stepping stone of the philosophy of the future? Likewise, we are forced to confront the complex question of whether or not Benjamin's later works fulfil, surpass, or disappoint the program suggested by his seemingly prophetic early essay. And so, we turn to Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason.*

1.2 ON THE KANTIAN SYSTEM

The object of the following section is to explore the Kantian critical project with an eye to what Benjamin might have meant when he wrote "there will never be any question of the Kantian system's being shaken and toppled" (Corr, 97). What aspects of Kantian critique lend themselves to this robust statement? Are the unshakable elements of Kant's project inherent in the conclusions of his inquiry, or merely inherent in the form of the Copernican turn?

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* crowns the Enlightenment struggle to determine the limits and powers of reason. According to Kant's original preface, the history of philosophy up until the eighteenth century was characterized by a struggle between various species of dogmatism, namely idealism and empiricism, or else a prevailing cultural attitude of scepticism bordering on indifferentism (A viii- A xi). In a now famous characterization that introduces the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that

> [h]uman reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. (A vii)

According to Kant, the consequence of the 'peculiar fate' of reason is a seemingly endless circulation of partial and incomplete attempts to rebuild systems of philosophical knowledge. In his section on the antinomies of pure reason Kant suggests four fundamental sites of metaphysical dispute which characterize the history of modern philosophy. These are specified as questions concerning the infinite expanse or first cause of the universe, the simplicity or divisibility of substance, the question of whether human subjects are causality determined or free and the question of whether beings in the world are necessary or

contingent. According to Kant's reading of the modern tradition, in the face of these questions thinkers either resigned themselves from the pursuit of any answer to these questions, or else they have sought, through the various camps of dogmatism, to concretely and systematically account for them. The resigned subject renounces philosophy, while dogmatic subjects answer the call of metaphysics with edifices, which, viewed from the perspective of the wider tradition, are in insupportable contradiction with one another.

In answer to the storied history of metaphysics, Kant proposes a 'Copernican revolution' of sorts which breaks with the tradition of attempting to "establish something about objects before they are given to us" and instead assumes that "the objects [of experience] must conform to our cognition" (B xvi). This shift is decisive insofar as the critical philosophy suspends its preoccupation with the nature of the world—and questions such as those concerning its simplicity or divisibility—and turns instead to investigate the mechanisms of cognition itself. In other words, philosophers before Kant attempted to make necessary claims about the constitution of the world through an examination of the objects of experience. Yet, the experiential category of "all objects of experience" is never available to us as finite human knowers. Our experience is necessarily finite since there can always be, as the expression goes, a 'black swan' which might interrupt whatever account of 'all swans' we might have deduced from our experience of the world. The dogmatic antagonisms that characterize early modern philosophy result from independent camps inferring from their finite experience some claim about the necessary constitution of experience as such.

Approached from the Copernican turn, which takes the objects of experience as given, a systematic account of the structures of cognition, the process whereby all experience is mediated in its totality, might offer a means toward restoring necessary claims

regarding experience to the scope of the process of philosophy. By suspending his judgement or decision pertaining to constitution of the objects of experience and affirming their givenness[1], Kant opens himself to the possibility of an unmediated access to the mechanisms by which cognition synthesizes and absorbs the stuff of experience. The result is Kant's systematic exploration of the means by which cognition makes sense of given objects. In lieu of looking to the "objects of experience before they are given to us" Kant opts to look for the necessary features of our cognition of objects of experience. He writes that "[t]hus as exaggerated and contradictory as it may sound to say that the [human] understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature [as they appear to us], and thus of the formal unity of nature, such an assertion is nevertheless correct and appropriate to the object, namely experience" (A 127).

Kant's decisive break with the tradition of philosophy demands the invention of a new method. In articulating the necessary laws of cognition Kant maintains that he reveals the fundamental structure of the process of human cognition and experience (at least as it is knowable to us) which had, so the argument goes, been lying unnoticed all along. The structure of human cognition is conceived such that its revelation, by means of its self-evidence, is forever-after indisputable. Instead of deducing structures from the concrete appearances of the world, it is as if Kant plucked the laws that structure all human cognition of experience from thin air. Proceeding from what is apparently least concrete, namely some faculty of making sense of a world that is never manifestly presented to us, Kant discovers the most indisputable laws of nature. Insights into the laws that necessarily determine experience are won not by inference from objects in the world, but rather through the abstraction of a cognitive anatomy of sorts that, accordingly, accounts for all necessary

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[1] A givenness, which, it must be emphasized, is restricted to human knowers.

structures of human cognition.

How one might *decide* where to begin the development of this anatomy within the unwieldy totality of the human world is monstrous in its ambiguity. Kant affirms this when he suggests that even the most basic philosophical distinction, namely that between cognition and experience, is fraught with overlapping and interdependent relations

> [t]here is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience? [...] But although all our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience. For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out. (B1 – B2)

Although experience and cognition might receive a preliminary categorical distinction, their distinct natures are not immediately obvious. While cognition is 'awakened' by experience, this does not mean that cognition is strictly a function of experience. There might be some remainder, according to Kant, which subsists on its own. Likewise, experience, although it presents itself as if it were immediately available, might always already carry the colourings of cognition. Experience, which seemingly presents itself as simple, might well be composite by virtue of the undetected structuring principles of the cognitive faculty. Since Kant intends to treat cognition before experience, he must somehow parse cognition from experience and further reduce cognition to its constitutive elements.

Kant elaborates his qualification of the anatomy of cognition through defining cognition as a power comprised of the chimerical actions of two elements, impressions and conceptual activities. This distinction maintains the ambiguous interrelation of experience

and the cognitive faculty. Kant writes that

> [o]ur cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is thought in relation to that representation (as a mere determination of the mind). Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition. Both are either pure or empirical. (B74)

While cognition is comprised of "two fundamental sources," they are, according to Kant's framework, available to independent scrutiny. Further, through his qualification that "both are either pure or empirical" Kant signals that there is something experiential in conceptual and intuitive activity, but importantly something that is pure, or *a priori* as well. This qualification enables Kant to isolate the 'transcendental' aspects in both elements of cognition, which is to say aspects which hold for all possible human experience. Kant undertakes the refinement and discovery of whatever necessity or *a priori* elements might inhere in intuition and the concepts in the chapters of the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled the "Transcendental Aesthetic" and the "Transcendental Analytic" respectively.

Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" both articulates the mechanics of the faculty of intuition apart from considerations of the faculty of the understanding, as well as argues for the thesis that all intuitions are presented to human subjects according to the forms of space and time. Kant's inquiry deliberately suspends any speculation regarding the constitution of experiential objects in themselves and thus only holds for the formal conditions through which appearances are presented to human cognition. Within Kant's technical terminology it is important to maintain that intuition is the term granted to the faculty as a whole, while *appearance* is the term designated for that which actually presents itself in intuition. Kant's decisive intervention in what otherwise might constitute an empiricist account of the

intuitive ground of experience is his affirmation that all appearances, if they are intelligible to us, must be ordered according to certain formal principles, namely space and time, which cannot be empirically abstracted from appearance.

Kant divides all sensation into two distinct groups, those belonging to the outer sense and the inner sense. 'Outer sense' is the means by which all objects that we represent as outside ourselves are presented to us. Outer sense, according to Kant, is necessarily spatial for the human knower. Kant provides a number of arguments in support of this conclusion. He writes that

> Space is not an empirical concept that has been drawn from outer experiences. For in order for certain sensations to be related to something outside me (i.e., to something in another place in space from that in which I find myself), thus in order for me to represent them as outside one another, thus not merely as different but as in different places, the representation of space must already be their ground. (A 23)

According to Kant's first argument for the ideality of space, we cannot imagine any scenario whereby sensations are not presented always already ordered in space. To abstract space from the objects of experience we must already be able to distinguish objects as occupying distinct spaces from one another. But since said objects are already spatially distinguished from one another, this abstraction is not an empirical conclusion, but rather the form in which space is always available to us. Kant's next argument maintains that space is not the product of appearances. He affirms that while we might be able to think of a space that is empty of objects, this does not entail that there is no space. Therefore it must be affirmed that space should "be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances" but "not as a determination which is dependent on them" (A24).

The other side of Kant's division, namely 'inner sense', designates the field of sensibility whereby the "mind intuits itself, or its inner state" (A22 – A23). According to Kant's second section of the "Transcendental Aesthetic" all inner sense is given through the

a priori form of time. Kant's argument for the ideality of time in many ways mirrors his argument for the ideality of space. He affirms that "[t]ime is not an empirical concept that is somehow drawn from an experience. For simultaneity or succession would not themselves come into perception if the representation of time did not ground them *a priori*" (A30). If we were to empirically abstract time from inner sense, according to Kant's argument, it would be necessary for us to first conceive of representations in terms of succession or simultaneity, otherwise we would have no means of orienting ourselves in this deduction. But in that case, simultaneity and succession, in other words time, would already be given to us. Therefore time provides the *a priori* formal condition of all intuitions of inner sense. Kant proceeds toward another example that affirms his conclusion by maintaining that while we might think of a scenario in which there are no appearances in time, this is not commensurate with unthinking time. Appearances "could all disappear, but time itself, as the universal condition of their possibility, cannot be removed " (A31).

Through establishing space and time as the formal conditions of all sensibility for human knowers Kant satisfies the conditions of his 'Copernican turn'. Leaving aside any consideration of the constitution of experience in itself, and thus any metaphysical conclusions drawn from an experience which is of necessity finite, Kant's assertion of the ideality of space and time establishes transcendental principles of appearance as they *must* be for us.

Having established certain universal principles in the presentation of the immediate intuitive component of all cognition, Kant's proceeds to articulate the universal principles that structure the mediate activity of translating intuition into knowledge, via the mechanism of conceptual activity. This is the object of the following section of the critique, entitled the "Transcendental Analytic."

Kant maintains that we can think the activity of the faculty of the understanding in isolation from the activity of the faculty of intuition. While the faculty of intuition is responsible for the immediate reception of appearance, the faculty of the understanding is responsible for ordering these diverse appearances according to categories of understanding. In distinction from space and time, which are the forms of intuition and result from the particular way in which human subjects receive appearance, the categories are the necessary structures through which human subjects process appearances into judgements. To think the understanding apart from intuition demands that we attend to the forms by which intuitions are taken up into the understanding. According to Kant we can "trace all actions of the understanding back to judgement" (A 69). While we might conceive of a potentially unlimited field of different judgements—"this cat is black"—Kant maintains that "[i]f we abstract from all content of a judgement in general, and attend only to the mere form of the understanding in it, we find that the function of thinking in that can be brought under four titles, each of which contains under itself three moments." (A 70) All judgements can be reduced to the combination of different parts of these twelve formal groups. Kant's conclusion regarding the necessary forms of judgement, like his investigation in the "Transcendental Aesthetic" does not seek to establish anything about the fundamental nature of experience. It refers merely to the structure of human cognition in general.

Kant's next step is to examine how his account of judgement relates to intuition. Since judgement is responsible for the process of the relation of different intuitions, it remains to be established how these intuitions, which have only so far been defined as a spatially and temporally arranged manifold, might be grouped so as to be related by judgement. Kant proposes that there are twelve categories which are spontaneously employed by the understanding to group the manifold of spatially and temporally

determined appearances so they can be taken up by judgement. Consequently, he discovers another necessary mechanism of cognition that arises coincident with, but independent of all experience. Kant writes that "[t]he same function that gives unity to the different representations in a judgement also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations in an intuition, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of understanding" (A 79).

According to Kant, the "Transcendental Aesthetic" and his "Transcendental Analytic" exhaust the field of synthetic knowledge of the human world which is available to the human subject with apodictic certainty. Constructively, this restores the status of philosophy by producing a robust account of the transcendental structures that underpin the domain of human experience. At the same time, the critical project invalidates the conclusions of the vast majority of the history of metaphysics by limiting the professed scope of philosophy's access to truth. The "Transcendental Dialectic," the subsequent chapter of Kant's critique, suggests that pure reason has no claim to knowledge of the soul, of god, or the constitution of the world. Since the 'human world' is constituted in its totality by a combination of experience, which cannot be transcendentally qualified except in its presentation within the forms of space and time and a faculty of cognition which is limited in its transcendental content to the structure of its judgements and the concepts by which it necessarily organizes the manifold of intuition, any transcendental assertions outside the purview of these limitations represent an extension of the jurisdiction of reason beyond its allotted boundaries.

1.3 On the Scope of Kantian Knowledge

One of great virtues, if not the greatest virtue of the Kantian critical philosophy is Kant's awe-inspiring ability as a conceptualizer. By way of the division of judgement into *analytic* and *synthetic* conceptual categories, as well as his division of all knowledge into the *a posteriori* and *a priori*, Kant inaugurates, from sheer thought alone, a framework through which to judge the transcendental status of his conceptual anatomy of cognition and experience. The distinct varieties of judgement (*analytic* and *synthetic*) and knowledge (*a posteriori* and *a priori*) and their implicit qualifications, serve not only to legitimate the conclusions of Kant's Copernican investigations, but also invalidate the results of the metaphysical tradition before Kant. *Analytic a priori* knowledge amounts to little more than tautology, while *synthetic a posteriori* knowledge is denied any claim on the status of the necessities governing the world. By virtue of Kant's conceptual structure, any philosophical investigation that proceeds from experience in lieu of cognition is barred from providing an apodictically certain account of what is.

A curious paradox that exposes the absolutism concealed in the modesty of the 'Copernican turn' emerges from Kant's capacities as a conceptualizer. While the critical philosophy professes to articulate a subject who occupies a finite world, barred from any encounter with the noumenal content of the world in itself, the critical philosophy simultaneously has the obverse effect of familiarizing the totality of experience, of invalidating the claim on truth of any experience of the world which stands outside of the mechanics of the transcendental subject. Adorno puts it succinctly in his lecture series on Kant when he notes that

> thus underling that duplication [namely, the duplication of the world into the noumenal and the phenomenal] stands the idea that our world, the world of

> experience, really has become a world familiar to us; the world in which we live has ceased to be ruled by mysterious, unexplained powers. Instead, it is something we experience as *our* world in the sense that we encounter nothing that is incompatible with our own rationality. [...] The world has ceased to be permeated by the ruins, by the surviving vestiges of a metaphysical meaning that even in its present fragmentary and elusive shape assumes the frightening and demonic visage that it possessed in the art and philosophy of the baroque age with which we are essentially concerned here." (AK, 110)

As much as Kant outlines the finitude of the human subject and the contingency of the modes of cognition that foreground her experience of the world, the totalizing precision of the transcendental conditions of the possibility of experience solidifies the ontological assumptions that comprise the critical project and their implications.

In circumscribing the limits of reason while consolidating an indisputable account of its mechanics, Kant effectively announces the secular subject of modernity. Intuitions are presented to the subject *within* the forms of space and time. They are always presented in between the past and future, between the infinitely small and the infinitely large, the beginning and end of time. The infinitely small and the infinitely large, as well as the distant (perhaps infinite) beginning and end of time are in themselves unavailable to the subject, except as *ideas of pure reason.* The subject is so finite that not only are they lodged in a finite place in space and time, but even more damningly, any adequate conception of the *domain* (which is to say its scope and limits) of the space and time in which he is finitely imbedded is never available to him. Every attempt to think the infinite domain of space can always be surpassed by a second attempt to think that domain plus one.

Any 'knowledge' of the world that is born out of formally determined temporal and spatial experience, which is to say all synthetic *a posteriori* knowledge, is consequently of a necessarily finite character. In light of the qualification of all experiences of the subject as finite, metaphysical questions such as questions concerning the nature of the world, the soul and causality are forever barred from human knowers. While Kant's later practical

philosophy articulates a moral structure and categorical imperative which ostensibly satisfy the condition of the peculiar fate of human reason, namely "that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself" (A vii), the *Critique of Pure Reason* effectively produces a subject that is equipped to accept the apparatuses of modern technical life *tout court*. She is excluded, by virtue of the necessary finitude of all her intuitions, from any encounter with the absolute[2] that is sufficient for knowledge. This subject is a Western Enlightenment subject, who has no sense of spaces or times of the sacred. In the absence of such knowledge, in the space of the finite between, the reduction of the world of things to a practical and fluctuating system of exchange value presents no offensive odour. Tradition atrophies. Its claim to esoteric truth and meaning has no place within the procession of intuitions of modernity. The latent power of the symbolic withers only to be replaced by succeeding flashes of ephemeral fashion. The critically circumscribed subject, barred from the absolute, reflects on comings and goings without recourse to any concrete orientation in the course of events beyond a categorical imperative and the minimal formal and categorical structures which foreground intuition and understanding. The Kantian subject is *subject* to the law of the *between* and it is obligated by this *between* to renounce the claims of the spirit of different places and times, be they religious or profane, in lieu of an absolute embeddedness in modern experience.

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[2] Kant does make space for the infinite, or absolute, within his critical system. But it is an infinite which is present to the subject mediated by the imagination. It is an idea of reason (be it, of the nature of God or the immortal soul) that is encountered purely intellectually. The infinite in Kant is a regulative principle, instead of a constitutive principle (Guyer, Kant, 234). Judgments which incorporate the ideas of pure reason do not amount to knowledge, but rather faith.

1.4 KANT AND THE ROOTS OF BENJAMIN

Kant's critical structure, in its systematic consistency, does not invite compromise or gradation. In asserting the revelation of the systematically related necessary formal and categorical structures of human experience, the critical philosophy demands the closure or reconfiguration of singular historical/cultural experiences whose distributions of truth and knowledge are ordered according to principles heterogeneous to the Kantian system. Any site of religious *knowledge* or *revelation* is transformed in its encounter with the Kantian philosophy into an ethically oriented site of religious *faith*.

The subject for whom the Kantian system does not account has a number of choices. They can replace philosophy and its search for necessity with a profession or affirmation of religious faith, but this gesture effectively extends the Kantian system. Or, they can choose to ignore the Kantian system and philosophize territories of experience that stand outside of the purview of the Kantian conceptual anatomy. Both of these responses threaten a facile reassertion of the dogmatism or indifferentism which characterized pre-Kantian philosophy. Consequently, neither response is an option for Benjamin. Benjamin's letters and essays suggest that his encounter with the critical project revealed a system with a certain unshakable power, which not only could not be ignored, but demanded elaboration and universalization. Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem in 1917 that

> Although I still have no proof of this, it is my firm belief that, in keeping with the spirit of philosophy and thus of doctrine to which it belongs (that is, if it does not perhaps constitute doctrine in its entirety), there will never be any question of the Kantian system's being shaken and toppled. Rather, the question is much more one of the system's being set in granite and universally developed. (CB, 97)

As numerous commentators have emphasized (among them Caygill and Fenves), one of the only unifying strands in Benjamin's early literary and philosophical works (1914 - 1921) is a

persistent engagement with Kant. Something in the Kantian system resists dismissal and demands redemption. Benjamin develops a very sparse account of which elements of the Kantian system sustain its claim on his thinking, but his 1918 essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" provides some indication.

The work begins by asserting that "[t]he central task of the coming philosophy will be to take the deepest intimations it draws from our times and our expectation of a great future, and turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system" (SW1, 100). From the outset, Benjamin announces that the philosophy of the future entails a certain responsibility to a field of the indeterminate and suggestive present, as well as a future pregnant with expectation and possibility. The injunction to relate these fields to the Kantian system implies some gap between what the Kantian system has succeeded in accomplishing and the potential the system contains to encompass that gap. Something which suggests itself in the present, and equally something which hangs in the great future, be it lived or scientific experience[3] demands, according to Benjamin, to be brought into relation to the Kantian system.

Benjamin elaborates the above passage to Scholem and indicates that he by no means accepts the Kantian system in its entirety. He writes that "no matter how great the number of Kantian minutiae that may have to fade away, his system's typology must last forever" (Corr, 97). The work of reconciling the Kantian system with the field with which the philosophy of the future grapples is as much a work of reconciliation, as it is a work of identifying which parts of the Kantian system to preserve and which to dispense with. In this spirit Benjamin writes in "On the Coming Philosophy" that "[i]t is of the greatest

[3] Peter Fenves, in the *Messianic Reduction* emphasizes the significant coincidence in the fact that Benjamin composed "On the Coming Philosophy" in Bern, shortly after Albert Einstein composed his preliminary sketches on the theory of relativity (MR, 177).

importance for the philosophy of the future to recognize and sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected" (SW1, 102).

Shortly after his introduction Benjamin signals one of the principal 'elements' of the Kantian system should be preserved and cultivated when he writes that "Kant is the most recent of those philosophers for whom what mattered was not primarily the scope and depth of knowledge but first and foremost its justification, and with the exception of Plato he is possibly the only one" (SW1, 100). In lieu of pursuing depth in philosophy for its own sake, in other words a baroque metaphysics for the sake of metaphysics, Benjamin maintains that the Kantian philosophical system is guided by a pursuit of the justification of its conceptual structures. In "On the Coming Philosophy" Benjamin does not go into any great detail with respect to an investigation of the question of judgement, but his 1916 work "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" suggests a fertile avenue for exploring what Kant's emphasized virtue might entail. In the essay, Benjamin suggests that judgement arises in the wake of the fall of man, wherein language profanely proliferates and loses its divine correspondence to creation. In humanity's fall from grace the direct relation between human language and the word of God—in other words, the created world—is broken. Benjamin writes that "[i]n the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose" (SW1, 71). The judging word, according to Benjamin, mediates the severed divinity of men with their divine origin. While we will elaborate Benjamin's theory of language and judgement further on in the thesis, for now it suffices to suggest the quasi-divine quality Benjamin accords to the function of judgement and justification. In suggesting that Kant is exceptional in the tradition of philosophy for his pursuit, first and foremost, of the justification of knowledge, Benjamin emphasizes the need

for a philosophy of the future to equal this standard.

In another letter to Gershom Scholem written in 1917, the year between "On Language" (1916) and "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), Benjamin makes another claim concerning the exceptional in the work of Kant, namely that "Kantian terminology is probably the only philosophical terminology that *in its entirety* did not only arise but was created" (CB, 103). Kant's exceptionality in the pursuit of the justification of knowledge accords with the exceptionality of his capacities as a creator of philosophical terminology. According to Benjamin's philosophy of language, postlapsarian language proliferates infinitely around the referents of its originary divine signification, capturing elements and moments of insight, but never adequately encompassing its object. Judgement and the judging word is that which serves to mediate between these wild linguistic proliferations. Through its mediations the judging word ascends towards a reunification of language and the world. Created language, in lieu of inherited language, is the condition of judgement's possibility. Benjamin maintains that speaking subjects do not speak *through* language, but rather always *in* language[4]. As post-structuralism will later emphasize, language is always already given. The *other* of language, not the *subject*, is that which speaks in the spoken word. In underscoring the exceptionality of Kant's capacity to create language, Benjamin suggests that Kant somehow breaks with a tradition of inheriting language, of philosophical terminologies that *arise* from their time and place. Instead, the Kantian philosophy is announced in a terminological system which is purely created. The demands of a justified knowledge are such that created language is its condition of possibility. Benjamin continues in the opening to his essay on the coming philosophy to suggest that Kant and

[4] Benjamin writes "[w]hat does language communicate? It communicates the mental [spiritual] being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language. Languages, therefore, have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages" (SW 1, 63)

Plato are guided by the "confidence that the knowledge of which we can give the clearest account will also be the most profound" (SW1, 100). This translates into Benjamin's prediction that "[t]he more unpredictably and boldly the development of future philosophy announces itself, the more deeply it must struggle for certainty, whose criterion is systematic unity or truth" (SW1, 100).

As suggested above, the structure of Kant's critical philosophy is such that it presents its findings as self-evident. The Kantian program is so thorough and rigorous in the form of its knowledge that it finds nothing in experience that is incompatible with its own rationality. What then, we might ask, might have arisen so as to call into question the present form of the Kantian system? In other words, Benjamin's call, in his letter to Scholem, to 'universalize' and 'set in granite' the Kantian system entails that there is something which somehow stands between the Kantian system and its universalization. This something is postulated by Benjamin in "On the Coming Philosophy" as new forms of experience, not only in the present or future, but also in the historically intuited past. To this end Benjamin writes that "the most important obstacle to linking a truly time- and eternity-conscious philosophy to Kant is the following: The reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest order" (SW1, 100). The form of all worldviews, according to Benjamin, is that their experience is always "unique and temporally limited" (SW1, 101). Kant's deficiency and hence what must be remedied in the philosophy of the future is his generalization of Enlightenment experience to all experience. According to Benjamin "Kant wanted to take the principles of experience [as such] from the sciences—in particular mathematical physics" yet "experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science" (SW1, 101). Kant's critical philosophy and its devaluation of experience to a field of

mechanical interactions is the consequence of a particular moment in which the authorities or intellects who might "have managed to give a higher context to experience" through religion or art, were marginal. Consequently, Kant and the lesser Enlightenment thinkers developed a philosophy adequate maybe to their time, but ultimately insufficient in relation to a philosophy of the future. Kant provides a valid explanation or framework for "knowledge that is lasting" while neglecting "the question of the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" (SW1, 100).

Benjamin proceeds in "On the Coming Philosophy" to articulate a number of sites where the tension between Kant's abilities as a conceptual thinker come into unsustainable tension with his neglect of the question of time and transience. This tension is manifest in Kant's mistaken generalization of the reality or world view of the Enlightenment onto experience and knowledge as such. Benjamin identifies two principal sites of mistaken generalization, namely Kant's conception of knowledge as that which arises from relations between subjects and objects and Kant's "relation of knowledge and experience to human empirical consciousness" (SW1, 103). On Benjamin's first emphasis, object-subject interactionism is an image in thought which underpins the totality of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.* The existence of subjects and objects is the ground of Kant's "Copernican Revolution." According to Kant, the tradition of philosophy before him mistakenly attempted to draw necessity from investigations into the objects of experience. The "Copernican Revolution" breaks with the tradition by investigating the cognizing subject. Yet nowhere in the revolutionary turn is the basis of these two distinct ontological categories adequately investigated. Benjamin emphasizes that the whole approach is couched within the conventions of a particular place and time. Thus Kantian subject is formed out of an analogy, according to Benjamin, with the empirical models of consciousness prevalent in

pre-Kantian English philosophy. Kant's rigorous purification of the trappings of metaphysics in philosophy succumbs to an unrecognized metaphysical presupposition from which his understanding of finitude and limitation ultimately result. Benjamin writes that "[i]t simply cannot be doubted that the notion, sublimated though it may be, of an individual living ego which receives sensations by means of its sense and forms its ideas on the basis of them plays a role of the greatest importance in the Kantian concept of knowledge" (SW1, 103). The whole conceptual apparatus of the Kantian critical system rests on an implicit metaphysical or, as Benjamin goes as far as to say, mythological structure. Without the rigorous mythological distinction between the domains of knowledge which are proper to objects and empirically affected subjects, Kant cannot determine the distributions of necessity across the structures of reception characteristic of the empirically effected subject. Benjamin elaborates that the implicit myth of an "individual living ego which receives sensations" has no more claim to a transcendental account of experience as such than the accounts of "clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own" or else "insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception" (SW1, 103). When viewed from the perspective of a deep historical time, each species of distribution of the concepts of subject and object—be it clairvoyant, insane, or Enlightened—is seen to arises in the course of "ephemeral experience." Consequently, as Benjamin writes, "Kantian 'experience' is metaphysics or mythology, and indeed only a modern and religiously very infertile one" (SW1, 103).

Benjamin's short hand assertion of the historically limited ground which sustains the Kantian concept of experience demands reconciliation with his high praises of the virtues of the Kantian system at the outset of his essay "On the Coming Philosophy." If the clarity and justification of a philosophical program are virtues, then their possibility over and above

the trappings of ephemeral experience are implied as possibilities. The route to this reconciliation and the development of clarity and justification in a work of philosophy is borne out of the other principal objection Benjamin brings to the Kantian critical project, namely Kant's manner of determining the "relation of knowledge and experience to human empirical consciousness" (SW1, 103). According to Benjamin, Kant falls short of the demands of a true unified system of knowledge by equivocating knowledge-as-such and experience-as-such with an instance of human empirical consciousness. Kant fails to take account of the historical in his categorical system. In overlooking the contingency which foregrounds any empirical consciousness, Kant mistakenly generalizes the particular content of Enlightenment empirical experience into a transcendental consciousness. Benjamin seeks to preserve the project of determining a transcendental consciousness, but for him this entails an extensive revision of the relation of knowledge and experience to the empirical.

Benjamin's revision can be understood in terms of his grounding assumption that "[p]hilosophy is based upon the fact that the structure of experience lies within the structure of knowledge and is to be developed from it" (SW1, 104). The answer to the problem which is generated by the myriad moments of 'ephemeral experience' is an assertion of the fundamental necessity of speculative philosophy. Speculative philosophy seeks to gives an adequate account of the diversity of experience latent in the present and pregnant in the 'great future'. Benjamin's speculative philosophy is tasked with the qualification that it must contain the clarity and justification of the Kantian system, while somehow giving an adequate account of all possible instances of the empirical consciousness. Benjamin writes that "the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating experience *exclusively* to the transcendental consciousness, makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible"

(SW1, 105).

Situated within these requirements, the paradoxical task of any speculative system presents itself. Although the speculative system takes the concept of pure knowledge as its ground, its justification is its ability to give an account of all possible experience. Thus echoing the opening lines of Kant's second introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*[5], Benjamin affirms that "the conditions of knowledge are those of experience" (SW1, 104). 'Real knowledge' somehow stands outside of empirical experience, while taking said experience as its condition of possibility. Benjamin departs from Kant insofar as Kant arrests the ephemeral flux of experience which underpins the moments of the empirical consciousness and forms a system of knowledge in the image of this instance of historically determined experience, while Benjamin is faithful to the claim of the ephemeral. 'Real knowledge' arises out of the insight into the contingent moments of its generative experiences. Benjamin writes

> Corresponding to the types of empirical consciousness are just as many types of experiences, which in regard to their relation to the empirical consciousness, so far as truth is concerned, have the value only of fantasy and hallucination. For an objective relation between the empirical consciousness and the objective concept of experience is impossible. All genuine experience rests upon the pure "epistemological (transcendental) consciousness," if this term is still usable under the condition that it be stripped of everything subjective. (SW1, 104)

"Objective experience" functions in Benjamin's essay to designate that which stands above the moments of empirical consciousness. Echoing neo-Kantian enthusiasms for the notion of the 'limit concept' (MR, 27), or else the Kantian noumenon, "objective experience" functions within the totality of Benjamin's system to designate the non-given locus around which every instance of empirical experience circulates—the total domain in which that which presents itself in dreams, in the moments of history and in diverse spaces and times

[5] Kant writes that "[t]here is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience" (CPR, B1)

attains its formless form. 'Real knowledge,' the knowledge proper to the transcendental consciousness, is the system of knowledge that is adequate to the apprehension of this domain.

"On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" does not go so far as to concretely describe the "epistemological / transcendental consciousness" that is adequate to knowledge of objective experience, but Benjamin supplies certain indications of its basic constitution. Benjamin suggests that the philosophy of the future is obligated to "find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object" (SW1, 104). Benjamin continues to specify that this means "to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept [knowledge] in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities" (SW1, 104). The transcendental consciousness which is proper to the speculative philosophy of the future not only ostensibly neutralizes notions of subjectivity and objectivity, but goes so far as to eliminate any metaphysical mediation which in any way recapitulates their opposition. The philosophy of the future demands a neutralization that seems to be beyond thought, a neutralization which Benjamin refrains from formulating. The philosophy of the future does not so much herald an accomplishment in the present as it signals a lack which might only find its resolution in the to-come. The philosophy of the future will somehow embody the clarity and justification of the Kantian system, while addressing a concept of experience unfolded to encompass the totality of its individual moments. Further, it will transcend the figures of the subject and the object. But what is left after the subject? How is the structure of the Kantian critical philosophy compatible with a consciousness that is "stripped of everything subjective?" Is this figure human or godly?

Jumping ahead to Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History," the import of

Benjamin's call for the 'neutralization' of the concepts of subject and object attains clarity in the third thesis. Benjamin writes that "only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is judgement day" (SW4, 390). Mankind is not yet redeemed, either in 1918 or at any other time. The redemption is futural. But the futural redemption does not merely signal the coming of God. The fragment is dialectical insofar as it unites sacred and profane images of the citation and recapitulation of all that has passed. The day of divine judgement recalls all of history to the present, while the *citation à l'ordre du jour* evokes the (French) military practice of taking precise account of the actions of the day. Both role-calls present a figure which somehow fulfils the task of the 'empirical/transcendental consciousness' intimated in "On the Coming Philosophy," namely to apprehend 'objective experience' through the moments of 'ephemeral experience.' The army officer who draws the list of the no doubt diverse experience of the day is a figure of finitude, while God, a figure of infinity. The redemption of mankind for Benjamin is lodged between these constitutions. The development of this thought, namely the task of the coming philosophy within the tension of finitude and infinity, finds some of its clearest articulation in Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man."

1.5 On Language as a Ground of the Speculative Philosophy of the Future

Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language As Such and on the Language of Man" represents, in the opinion of many commentators, Benjamin's first attempt to articulate a speculative philosophy. The work ostensibly presents an account of language, but a highly idiosyncratic

one at that. It should be said at the outset that Benjamin's injunction to 'neutralize' the concepts of subject and object in the development of a transcendental consciousness adequate to the philosophy of the future attains at least a preliminary extension in "On Language" to the sphere of language, a sphere which by common accounts is treated through the lens of subjectivity.

This common account, which views language through the lens of subjectivity, bears unmistakable affinities with the manner of doing philosophy Benjamin sets himself against in "On the Coming Philosophy." Benjamin characterizes the commonplace antagonist of his linguistic project at the outset of his essay when he writes that according to the Bourgeois conception of language "the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being" (SW1, 65). According to Bourgeois conceptions of language, language is commensurate with vocal or symbolic expressions between human subjects who instrumentalize language to designate factual objects in the world. According to this logic not only do subjects exist, but by consequence objects—in their subordinated self-evidence—are available for designation. The Bourgeois conception of language is predicated on the assumption of a factual availability of objects in the world. These are the objects taken up in language and there is no mystery to them. Language is a veneer through which the world as it is demonstrably ordered is related between subjects. Yet for Benjamin, every presumption that the materiality of experience is factually available is inherently suspect. Echoing his critique of Kant's tendency to neglect 'ephemeral experience' and to take the "unique and temporally limited" experience of a moment as the all, the Bourgeois conception of language is simply a reifying sleight of hand. Not only do its presuppositions rob the mediation of materiality of any historical awareness, they also conceal their latent metaphysical presuppositions.

Consequently, Benjamin's task in "On Language" is to present a genesis of language which does not fall prey to these reifying tendencies. This presentation develops a systematically structured perspective that can only be taken to be the beginnings of the 'transcendental consciousness' suggested in "On the Coming Philosophy." Peter Fenves, in his recent commentary on Benjamin entitled *The Messianic Reduction*, suggests the enormity of Benjamin's gesture in "On Language," and its commensurability with this characterization when he writes that "Benjamin's argument for the applicability of the term *language* beyond the conscious subject is modelled on Kant's argument for space and time as pure intuitions" (MR, 137). While it suffers in translation, Fenves compellingly argues that Benjamin's attempt to define language as such, namely *Sprache überhaupt,* is to be read in analogy with Kant's term for consciousness in general, namely *Bewusstein überhaupt.*[6] According to Benjamin, "On Language" attempts to develop a "purified concept of language" (SW1, 74) through reckoning with the diverse field of its expressions, both in cultural and theological history. The purification of *Sprache überhaupt* reprises Benjamin's injunction in "On the Coming Philosophy" to attain a purified concept of the "empirical / transcendental consciousness." This connection is further concretized in "On the Coming Philosophy" when Benjamin writes that "[a] concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize" (SW1, 108). *Sprache uberhaupt* presents a means of exploring the constitution of experience and knowledge that is not strictly beholden to the domains of subject and object. Likewise, it presents a means of accounting for the diversity of 'ephemeral experience' in its formulation of the genesis of the 'language of man' out of the fall from paradise.

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[6] See Fenves (MR, 155)

Benjamin begins to unfold his conception of language—a language beyond subjects and objects—through a familiar cultural idiom, namely the fact that "[i]t is possible to talk about a language of music and of sculpture." Each of these spheres, which are often colloquially understood as languages, can be understood as the results of a tendency "inherent in the subjects concerned—technology, art, justice, or religion—toward the communication of the contents of the mind [spirit]"[7] (SW1, 62). Art and music function in the beginning of "On Language" to demonstrate the existence of spheres of expression/language, which are not reducible to a designative utility. Instead, they speak from some latent content of spirit that expresses itself in the world. The languages of music and art stand in marked opposition to the Bourgeois conception of language, insofar as they present an opening to spirit which has no concrete correlate in the 'world of objects'. Communication in words, according to Benjamin, is "only a particular case of human language" (SW1, 62). Other cases of human language, such as sculpture or music, demand to be encompassed by the concept of language.

Having begun to sketch his eventual thesis that "all expression, insofar as it is a communication of contents of the mind [spirit], is to be classified as language" (SW1, 62) Benjamin's next step is to integrate the scope of all that 'expresses' into his conceptual structure. Since the essay on language is intent on 'neutralizing' notions of subjects and objects, Benjamin concludes that all expression in the world, whether unfolding from within the scope of human expression or the expression of *things* and *events* in the world, expresses in language. Benjamin writes that the existence of language

> is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental [spiritual] expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but

[7] It should be noted here that Geist is rendered in the Harvard edition of Benjamin's selected works as Mind, whereas other translations privilege the translation as Spirit. Benjamin's original expression is *geistiger Inhalte* (CE, 15).

> with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental [spiritual] contents.
>
> (SW1, 62)

Benjamin's pursuit of *Sprache uberhaupt* requires an expansion of the concept of language to the totality of 'events' and 'things' in the world. Benjamin contends that things in the world, such as lamps or trees, in expressing their spiritual contents, convey a mute language that is akin to the mute language of arts such as painting or sculpture. This is not to say that the 'being' of what is in the world is fully expressed in every moment of its expression. For Benjamin there is a constitutive gap between the mental/spiritual entity that is the condition of possibility of expression and its expression itself. Benjamin writes that "[t]he language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression" (SW1, 63). Benjamin's qualification of the constitutive gap between 'being' or 'mental / spiritual contents' and expression is a necessary qualification in light of his rejection of Bourgeois conceptions of the demonstrative function of language. Were things, arts and events to present their full inner life in expression there would be no time or history. Benjamin's distinction between 'objective experience' and 'empirical experience' in "On the Coming Philosophy" is established out of the same tension. An 'objective experience' of entities in the world might be available for the redeemed philosophy of the future, but it is not for us.

Benjamin's distinction generates a preliminary ontology. He writes that "the language of a mental [spiritual] entity is directly that which is communicable in it" and that "[t]he linguistic being of things is their language" (SW1, 64). Instead of affirming that the being of an entity is expressed *through* language—i.e. the lamp communicates its being *through* language—Benjamin posits that it is the linguistic being, and linguistic being alone, of a thing

that communicates itself. Consequently the expressive language of a thing cannot be "externally limited or measured" by relation to whatever 'unexpressed' remainder there is in the being of a thing. Being and linguistic being constitute two distinct ontological domains, at least with respect to things.

Having established a general framework of the existence of language in all entities in the world, Benjamin goes on to distinguish between three varieties of language, namely the language of things, the language of man and the language of God. Benjamin begins with the distinction between the 'language of man' and the 'language of things'. He writes that, like animate and inanimate entities in the world, "the linguistic being of man is his language." Yet this is qualified by a further distinction which generates the exceptional structure of human linguistic being, namely that "the language of man speaks in words" and that "[m]an therefore communicates his own mental [spiritual] being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things" (SW1, 64). In distinction from the languages of things, which are radiating sites of pure expression of their linguistic being, the expression of man is naming and consequently knowing. In the midst of a world of expressing things, man expresses in the speaking of words and the giving of names to the objects of the world which announce themselves in their languages. Benjamin writes that "[o]nly through the linguistic being of things can he [man] get beyond himself and attain knowledge of them—in the name. Gods creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks" (SW1, 65).

Yet God's creation is not fulfilled in the simple act of naming, because the languages of man are as diverse as the languages of things. Benjamin writes that "[w]ithin all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed." (SW1, 66). Recalling "On the Coming Philosophy," the

structures of *linguistic being* which correspond to the 'objective experience' of the *being* of things are "unique and temporally limited" in their manifestations. It is only in moments of revelation that the names of man are adequate to their objects. Benjamin writes that "[t]he highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible" (SW1, 67). Revelation is the unique moment in which the naming language of man attains its complete commensurability with not only the particular linguistic being of things but also the being of things themselves.

Benjamin's characterization of the structure of the language of man, in both its naming function, and its imperfection, is derived from his analysis of the language of God and the biblical story of creation. It should be noted that within the theological context Benjamin develops in "On Language" all of the above characterizations of the language of man apply only to postlapsarian human language. The middle section of Benjamin's curious essay is devoted to a linguistically attentive exegesis of Genesis, through which he develops a characterization of the language of God, prelapsarian human language, and the fall into the poastlapsarian condition.

Benjamin begins to develop an image of the language of God through an articulation of the rhythms of the act of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. According to Benjamin "the rhythm by which the creation of nature (in Genesis 1) is accomplished is: Let there be—He made (created)—He named" (SW1, 68). In the rhythm of biblical creation the *word of God*, the "Let there be," is the seed of the creation of the world. "In individual acts of creation [in Genesis] (Genesis 1:3 and 1:11) only the words "Let there be" occur" (SW1, 68). In speaking the word, according to Benjamin, God creates. But beyond the pure creative divine word, God's language is the original source of the name. In announcing at the end of creation that "he saw that it [creation] was good" God's language steps back from the immediacy of the

creative act and takes on the function of cognizing. Naming the world in its goodness extends language beyond its creative immediacy to a universal cognition which is the divine origin of knowledge. Benjamin suggests that "[l]anguage is therefore both creative and the finished creation; it is word and name. In God, name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name" (SW1, 68). The very fact of God's capacity to see that creation is good implies, according to Benjamin, that "God made things knowable in their names" (SW1, 68).

In accounting for the genesis of man Benjamin is careful to maintain that in distinction from the remainder of creation "God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him" (SW1, 68). Instead, the second story of creation stipulates that man was made from earth, inflected with the breath of God. Fenves emphasizes this connection in the *Messianic Reduction* by citing the biblical words for earth (*adamah*) and blood (*dam*) (MR, 143). Man is formed out of the pre-existing material of creation and thus he is accorded an exceptionality among all other creation. The first man is, according to Benjamin, not sub-ject to language like the other objects of creation, but stands above them with the power to name in the likeness of God. However, the nominative capacity of the language of man is categorically different from that of God insofar as the names man speaks are spoken *onto* the world. The language of God speaks into the uncreated and thereafter there is world, whereas man finds himself always already in creation. Like the cognitive/creative word/name of the language of God, human language creates and cognizes. But the creative structure of human language is of a different order of magnitude than that of God. God's creation is pure, while man's creation is the creation of knowledge and name for that which materially already is, such as the plants and the animals. This distinction is concretized through Benjamin's

announcement that "[m]an is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator" (SW1, 68).

The condition of the original language, Adam's language in prelapsarian paradise, is one of perfect commensurability with the things of creation. While man is distinguished from God through his diminished creative power, he is like God in the perfect adequacy of his names to creation—he completes God's creation in the complete attribution of names to the world. Each animal steps forward to Adam and receives its perfect name. But paradise is lost, and in its loss the infinite, multiple languages of the postlapsarian world take the place of the perfect language. Benjamin writes that the "paradisical language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge, whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language" (SW1, 71).

The fall, the condition of all human language to follow, comes about according to Benjamin through the introduction of false names to paradise through the tree of knowledge. The tree of knowledge presents knowledge of 'good' and 'evil'. But in light of the final day of creation, when God nominated all of creation as good, it is clear that the nominative category of evil is an excessive supplement to a world that has already been named. Consequently, as Benjamin writes "[n]ame steps outside itself in this knowledge [of good and evil]: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language" (SW1, 71). In attempting to reconcile excess, the name 'evil,' with a creation which has already been exhaustively nominated as good, language is corrupted and its immediate correspondence to creation is ruptured. Benjamin maintains that "[k]nowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word" (SW1, 71). In the introduction of false language to the world

the language of man becomes a mediate parody of its once immediate expression and cognition.

The fall of man has three linguistic consequences for Benjamin, namely the proliferation of languages, the advent of judgement and the advent of abstraction. In the introduction of the false name of evil the immediate correspondence of names to their objects is broken. Consequently, human language proliferates in abortive attempts to recapture the pure immediacy of the paradisical language. Postlapsarian language circulates indefinitely around its barred signified. In the field of these wild proliferations judgement arises as the means by which languages are evaluated and compared. Benjamin maintains that "[i]n the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose" (SW1, 71). Judgement, which is both the exercise of the judging human and the judgement of God, presents the magical potential for a redemption of the languages of men. Recalling Benjamin's third thesis on history, Judgement day is that time in which mankind is redeemed and the past becomes citable in all of its moments. In the dialectical image of the human *citation a l'ordre du jour* and the divine day of judgement the transubjective quality judgement presents itself. The ideal end of judgement is the reconciliation of all the unique and temporally limited moments of the language of man.

Benjamin's theory of postlapsarian language is not content with a transformed image of the adequacy of human language to the world of things. The transition from the 'blissful' prelapsarian paradise into the postlapsarian world is connected with a 'silencing' of the language of things. Benjamin suggests that the postlapsarian condition of human language results in an "over-naming" of things. The multiplicity of postlapsarian languages strive to capture the latent spiritual /mental content of the things of the world but cannot through their excessive language. Things, according to Benjamin, are driven to sadness by their

silence. He writes that "[b]ecause she is mute, nature mourns" and because of her sadness, nature is mute. "In mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate" (SW1, 73). The mourning of nature for her lost relationship to humanity is generative of a silence that is the only space in which she can maintain her decency.

Chapter 2: The Circulation of the Languages of Humanity

2.1 BAUDELAIRE, BENJAMIN AND SURREALISM

Benjamin's early theoretical writings provide a robust conceptual structure through which the present is revealed in its contingency. Throughout these writings a potential vantage or consciousness is explicitly posited in which knowledge would efface its contingency and become fundamentally transcendental, in which names might be restored to their pure adequacy to the things of experience[8]. Benjamin's "On the Coming Philosophy" situates the moment of the redemption of knowledge and philosophy in a future which is yet to come while "On Language as Such" situates the point of transcendental knowledge, or pure name, in a prelapsarian past. In either case, the present is defined by its fallen systems of knowledge that mistakenly generalize their image of experience onto experience-as-such, or else mistakenly persist in their contingent iteration of human language. Both characterizations suggest circulations of knowledge and language that attempt to attain adequacy with the things to which they refer, but are nonetheless barred from the paradisiacal knowledge of 'objective experience' or the purified name. Benjamin's attempt to reconcile the justification

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8 It is worth noting where Benjamin falls within the *Erlebnis/Erfahrung* debate which characterized much of early twentieth century German philosophy. Peter Fenves maintains that Benjamin's position falls somewhere between the two accounts. According to Fenves, Benjamin affirms the "pathos of the contemporary *Erlebnis discourse*, which summarily repudiates the "mechanical-mathematical" experience of the physical sciences; but he does not then expand this pathos in evocation of the higher life that awaits whomever has enough courage to beak out of the narrow confines of Kantian critique in particular and Western-rationalism in general" (MR, 156). In short, Benjamin attempted to affirm the consistency and determinability of experience characteristic of *Erfahrung* discourse, but only once it had been purified of its assumptions regarding subject-object causation. Martin Buber's mystical affirmation of lived experience, or Wilhelm Dilthey's *psychologism* appealed to Benjamin in their exploration of territories of knowledge outside of the Enlightenment model, but provided no means of reconciling the demands of the reformulated Kantian system. Fenves suggests that Benjamin's *oeuvre* can be interpreted as a development of the phenomenological natural reduction towards a 'messianic reduction.' Experience remains hypothetically determinable, but phenomenology's reduction fails to sufficiently 'neutralize' its implicit subject-object distinctions.

and clarity of the Kantian program with ephemeral experience yields a preliminary speculative ontology of language and representation which accounts for the history of culture and its reflections through the clarification of a theologically structured constitutive gap between names and things. Benjamin's development of the Kantian program produces a theoretical structure that is kindred with Kant in its self-consistency, but departs from Kant in the fundamental openness of his through to the possibility of experiences, which are to come. Consequently, Benjamin's thought, as yet another moment of the proliferation of the languages of man, does not profess to stand in as the redemptive culmination of knowledge and human language. The early essays are no *fait-accompli* but rather a gesture toward the necessary form of redeemed knowledge. The question for Benjamin in the 1920s and 1930s is one of actualizing and politicizing the results of his early research.

The principal object of this chapter is to develop the assertion that Benjamin attempts to produce a political and practical orientation for his theories of language and the coming philosophy through his investigation of surrealist literary experimentation and the appropriation of its techniques into his later 'historical materialist' project. Benjamin's work with and out of the surrealists develops methods of bringing the 'things of the world' from their silence through the development of concrete experiential records. A theoretical program, such as that of the surrealists, which is predicated on the development of literary traces of singular encounters with the things of the world is closely aligned with Benjamin's early aims. The technological distribution of surrealist insights through avenues of publication and forms of mass art presents the means of politicizing these investigations. This connection is attested to in numerous places throughout Benjamin's writings, such as in his 1929 essay "Surrealism; *The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,*" where he emphasizes surrealism's capacity to push "the 'poetic life' to the utmost limits of possibility"

and to bring their theoretical knowledge into concrete lived expression (SW2.1, 208). Benjamin suggests that "it is as magical experiments with words, not as artistic dabbling, that we must understand the passionate phonetic and graphic transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism" (SW 2.1, 212) The surrealists present a development of Benjamin's own early theories of language. They give magic to words, and explore the pliable sphere of the naming of things. This is why Benjamin writes in 1927, two years before the publication of "Surrealism," that "whereas in Germany I feel entirely isolated among the men of my generation, there are isolated presences is France—especially Aragon and the surrealist movement—in which I see things at work that concern me" (FSR, 29).

At the outset of this investigation it is important to maintain that Benjamin's early theories of language and knowledge are not simply concerned with the configuration of a moment of redemption. While a pure "transcendental / epistemological consciousness" or a restoration of the prelapsarian felicity of the languages of humanity might be the ultimate orientation of his theory, there is a preliminary obstacle for the coming philosophy, namely the task of recognizing the multiplicity of existent language, of bringing the consequences of the ephemerality of experience into sharp distinction. This task is threatened by the fact that particular 'languages of humanity' in the form of social ideology, are generalized to the point of excluding the recognition of their historical contingency. Kant's system of philosophy reifies the Enlightenment empirical consciousness into the figure of consciousness as such. Modernity presents a language for cognizing the things of the world that reduces them to exchange value. Before the question of the redemption of the languages of humanity can be posed, the contingency of the moments of language must be

developed to the point of its recognition. While the myriad languages of humanity might be inadequate to the things of the world, the task of reconciling them is only possible through the recognition of their singular diversity.

When the surrealists bring the things of the world to singular moments of speech, they are implicitly developing enunciations that are fundamentally incompatible with the stifling languages of their early twentieth century moment. Benjamin's encounter with the surrealists represents the beginnings of the politicization of his early theory of language. Benjamin's alignment with surrealism broadens his theory of language, which is abstract in its prescriptions, into a program for socially distributing fragmentary insights into the nature of language and history. This socially distributed theoretical/literary program contains the power to, if not redeem the 'languages of men', at least occasion the recognition of the task of their redemption.

I will begin the development of this argument by elaborating the aesthetic theory of Charles Baudelaire, a fundamental influence of surrealism in the 1920s, and the object of a great deal of Benjamin's mature work in the 1930s. In its explorations of fashion and beauty Baudelaire's 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" develops important affinities between the implicit structures of temporality and perception that foreground the projects of the surrealist and Benjamin. From there I will proceed to articulate the character of surrealist writing through a study of Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, suggesting that surrealist theory, as a theory which seeks to infinitely transcend itself (PP, 195-196) utilizes accounts of experience in which the scope of a totality of expectations are ruptured to illustrate its logic. This is suggested in Aragon's 'corrective' (PP, x) section of *Paris Peasant,* namely "The Peasant's Dream." I will intersperse my analysis of these primary texts of surrealist theory with Benjamin's own reflections on the movement, examining Benjamin's emphases of certain

stylistic approaches which figured prominently in both the writings of Baudelaire and the surrealists. From this I will develop the argument that many of Benjamin's writings from the 1930s, following his encounter with surrealism, recapitulate surrealist stylistic approaches to the question of the exposition of the fleeting and ephemeral. These stylistic considerations serve Benjamin and the surrealists in their respective projects to develop both an understanding and redemption of modern life, beyond the possibilities afforded by Baudelaire. Ultimately surrealism and Benjamin's brand of historical materialism are encumbered by the burden of articulating a redemptive utopia that is not yet fully realized in the present. Their tasks entail a constant dialectical struggle between theory, which orients investigation but also serves to close of the scope of what it admits, and those experience which resist appropriation and symbolization, between conceptions of human agency and material experience from without.

2.2 On the Separation of Material and Image

Charles Baudelaire's 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" is widely considered the first major statement of the aesthetics of modernity. The work develops an account of the aesthetics of modernity through a careful reflection on Baudelaire's contemporary, a lithographic artist named Monsieur G. According to Baudelaire, Monsieur G's lithographs are exceptional in the history of French representative artwork insofar as they capture the fleeting gestures and accents that constitute modern fashion, in lieu of re-inscribing classical images of beauty onto the present. The 'painter of modern life' beaks with tradition insofar as he paints in a modern medium—the lithograph—and he paints a modern subject—namely modern Paris. The modern medium is exceptional for the breadth of representation

it permits. Baudelaire's artistic hero is reputed to work on hundreds of lithographs at a time. The lithograph is at once cheap to produce—and therefore free of the traditional trappings of the nineteenth century art-sponsorship—and quick to produce—enabling Monsieu G to work at a pace which is adequate to his fleeting object. The modern subject, Paris, is exceptional in the tempo of its transformations. The rapid expansion of the material base of production through the two major moments of the industrial revolution occasioned the rise of the first mass culture of conspicuous and ephemeral consumption in Paris. Industrial modernity produced volumes of fabric and completed garments which were unprecedented in all of history. For the first time an entire urban middle class could be clothed. Not only could they be clothed, but with each passing season they could be clothed again and again[9]. The nineteenth century, as Ronald Schleifer makes clear in *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance,* is a century of abundances, which make visible the fracturous tempo of modern life.

Baudelaire begins his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" with a curious example, namely a description of the way in which a modern Bourgeois subject—an allegory of Baudelaire's contemporaries—engages with the Louvre. According to Baudelaire, the Bourgeois subject in the famous art gallery attends only to the major works of art history: "the Davide's" and "the Ingres." The Bourgeois subject's mistake is not his enjoyment of these major works, but rather his misplaced assumption that the history of these major works of art is commensurate with the history of art in general. Passing over the minor works collected in that space, the Bourgeois subjects neglect a vast history available to them. Their aesthetic practice is marred by their inability to develop modes of seeing which are commensurate with modernity. In isolating this bourgeois tendency, Baudelaire implicitly

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[9] See Ulrich Lehmann's recent *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* and Ronald Schleifer's *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance.*

suggests a need to recommit ourselves, culturally and individually, to the task of uncovering the artistic and historical value of the newly emerged staggering array of minor works of art.

An aesthetic practice which is commensurate with the conditions of modernity is exemplified in the first pages of "The Painter of Modern Life" where Baudelaire presents an image of himself in his study, before a series of lithographs:

> I have before me a series of fashion plates dating from the Revolution and finishing more or less with the Consulate. These costumes, which seem laughable to many thoughtless people—people who are grave without true gravity—have a double-natured charm, one both artistic and historical. They are often very beautiful and drawn with wit; but what to me is every bit as important, and what I am happy to find in all, or almost all of them, is the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time.
> (PML, 2)

Baudelaire immediately notes that he is not looking into these plates for a superficial sense of their artistic charm—for some sense of nostalgia or kitsch. Rather, he is arrested by their individual testament to a specific feeling of beauty or morality, a feeling that is very much of their time. The lithograph, as Baudelaire's commentary makes clear, is a technology of art that demands a reconstitution of our conventional modes of aesthetic appreciation. The lithograph, like the technologies of production in fashion, enables the coming in-to being of an object which in hindsight was 'there all along.'

This revelation is not without its problems and complications. Anyone who has, owing to an inclement schedule, attempted to engage with the contents of an entire art gallery in a single afternoon understands the exhaustion and the ultimate feeling of futility such overzealous projects are wont to evoke. Likewise, there is something endearingly futile in Baudelaire's pose before his fashion plates. Sitting before the many traces of ephemeral, fugitive and contingent moral content contained in these plates, Baudelaire sits with a superhuman historical and aesthetic challenge. The obverse of Baudelaire's attention to such

diverse and rich historical works is, ultimately, the extent to which historical knowledge remains hidden from him.

The practice of a seeing adequate to modernity demands a reformulation of the idea of beauty. Baudelaire consolidates his injunction to attune the aesthetic gaze to artistic technologies of the present and to its content when he writes:

> Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suitable to human nature. I defy anyone to point to a single scrap of beauty which does not contain these two elements. (PM, 3)

While this observation, that our capacity to engage with the eternal element of beauty is always limited to the madly fluctuating aperture of a certain fleeting moment, appears commonplace from a contemporary standpoint it resounds with consequence. Baudelaire, whose life spanned the middle period of the nineteenth century, witnessed the boom of speed and tempo of nineteenth century European life. He stood at a particular crux, namely that which bridged a pre-modern Europe fixated on ideas of permanence, God, and eternity, and a modern, Hausemannized, secular Europe. Coupling these major social transformations with the increasing tendency toward industrialization, speed, and mechanization, the nineteenth century is the site of the simultaneous realization of the profound difference between the not-long-ago and the present, and the ultimate openness of this very present, its unfinished, ever operative 'fleeting' and 'ephemeral' qualities.

By postulating that beauty assumes new definitions according to all of the contingencies of fashions and of times, Baudelaire challenges the assumption that the materiality that underlies our experience is knowable. In place of such conceptions, Baudelaire's assertion entails the conclusion that an understanding of material culture is

always mediated by the circumstantial contingencies of knowing—ie. the time and place that structure a particular idea of beauty. In other words, the knowledge of a particular piece of materiality is neither directly cognized, nor is it simply cognized according to a transcendental-idealist structure of cognition. Recalling Benjamin's formulations in his early essays, modernity is comprised of an ever-accelerating proliferation of the languages of humanity. The Bourgeois subject lacks the capacity to perceive the rate of proliferation of modern languages and instead consolidates them in an outmoded understanding of the grand narrative of art history. The Bourgeois subject does not perceive the "relative, circumstantial element" of beauty, but yokes beauty to an eternal and timeless model. Modernity makes visible a new structure of temporality. The task of the revolutionary in the present is to bring these energies into visibility.

Baudelaire's insight has the implicit function of imbuing the underlying material of experience—this dress, this table, these people—with profound mystery and profound potentiality. As we cleave cognition from material, the world around us, which appears so definite and unalterable, assumes an unsettling air of contingency. For instance, there is a plain table in my room that rests comfortably among the chairs and on the carpet. Its appearance has the air of permanence and necessity. Yet, for the carpenter who built it, this table may very well radiate his livelihood, or reflect back to him the secret struggles of a lifetime of craft. For my father, who gave it to me several years ago, this table might appear as the site where his long-dissolved family once gathered to eat together. His object-image is laden with sentiment and absence. And modern consumerism, though its allegorical understanding of material culture, might encourage the formation of an object-image of the table that is reduced to exchange value. In all of these examples the materiality of the table persists, but it is taken up into different cognitions.

2.3 ON THE PARADOXES OF THE SPLIT

Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" is valuable insofar as it raises the question of the new aesthetics of modern life, but it falls short of an ethics in its vague prescriptions concerning the invention or development of a way of seeing which is adequate to modernity. Baudelaire's articulation of the Bourgeois experience of the Louvre suggests that the Bourgeois subject is not shaken from his manner of seeing simply in confronting the diverse arts of modernity. The Bourgeois subject confronts the new art with a laugh, and a sensibility which is "grave without gravity." The politicization of Baudelaire's insight into the character and the art-work of modernity demands the extension of the insight to socially transmissible forms.

Stated briefly, the ethical question which results from Baudelaire is that if material culture can be taken up into different object-images, which might preserve the singularity of modern experience in the case of the myriad lithographs of Monsieur G., or else repress the proliferation of singularity in the case of a Bourgeois aesthetic consciousness or modern consumerist allegory, then how ought we to strive toward the former. This question is encumbered by two fundamental paradoxes, namely the paradoxical question of the aim of revolutionary re-inventions of our relation to materiality, and the paradox of the means of our own transformation. Surrealism and Benjamin's historical materialism can be understood as systems of understanding which attempt to address these paradoxes through the development of theoretical structures and corresponding 'experiential documents.' These systems recapitulate many of the virtues of Baudelaire's ode to modernity, while buttressing it with 'experiential accounts' that are replete with inassimilable alterity.

With respect to the first paradoxical question, namely the aim of revolutionary materialistic reinvention, Benjamin offers us a sense of the underlying challenge. Benjamin writes in his 1940 "On the Concept of History" that "the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us" (SW4, 389). If the image of happiness we cherish, which is to say the object of our own re-invention, is a function of our times, just as Baudelaire's image of beauty is a function its time, then our attempts to articulate the direction of revolutionary re-invention will be burdened by the extent to which they are already determined by the present. The historical materialist *utopia* then becomes the very no-where the Greek etymology implies because it is articulated only through the lens of the present, yet it cannot be of that present, insofar as that present structures its possible imaginations.

The paradox of the means of perceptual transformation follows from this problematic. How could cognition resolve to reform itself if the scope of its ideal is already circumscribed by its necessary historical contingency? Can cognition merely resolve to perceive anew and suddenly reform itself? Where does 'the new' arrive from? Might the materiality of culture play some formative role, which is to say, does something from beyond the scope of our knowledge and expectations intervene in cognition to occasion a transformation in a movement that is kindred with grace or revelation? Benjamin's curious 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" complicates this paradoxical impasse. Recapitulating a theory of voluntary and involuntary memory in Proust, Benjamin writes:

> One afternoon, the taste of a kind of pastry called a *madeleine* transported him [Proust] back to the past, whereas before then he had been limited to the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of conscious attention. [...] In sum, Proust says that the past is situated "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object..., though we have no idea which one it is. And whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it, depends entirely on chance." (SW4, 315)

According to the passage, prior to Proust's encounter with the *madeleine* he was limited in his investigations of the past to the promptings of his conscious attention. The latent power of the *madeleine* was hidden from him in plain view. Proust's ingestion of the *madeleine* signifies an encounter with alterity which could not be predicted. The latent historical power of the object is necessarily situated beyond the reach of his intellect, and therefore inaccessible to Proust until a particular moment in which he encounters this singular piece of materiality in this singular way. The *madeleine* disrupts the scope of the conscious promptings that had heretofore determined Proust's capacity to cognize himself and to uncover his own past. The material object in this example forces a reordering of its own cognition. Proust's madeleine illustrates that the question of the means of transforming ways of seeing in modernity, the question of facilitating the recognition of the proliferation of the languages of humanity, demands an approach which suspends subject-object distinctions and the corresponding assumptions regarding agency and freewill.

The discovery of the historical determination of things is eminently liberating insofar as it discloses the extent to which cognition is ultimately open to revolution and transformation, but also eminently paradoxical. The discovery demonstrates that our desires and our images of happiness are ultimately guided by the time to which we have been assigned. Transformation cannot be summarily accomplished through an act of voluntary memory, but demands patience. As Benjamin suggests, "whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it, depends entirely on chance." Navigating this problematic is the challenge of the dialectical thinker. Both Louis Aragon, in his *Paris Peasant* collection, and Benjamin take this up in their works. A close examination of both authors yields two similar yet compellingly different attempts to develop this project.

2.4 On The Relation Between Material and the Image in Surrealism

Benjamin's 1929 essay "Surrealism" contains a curious characterization and celebration of a certain variety of surrealist writing. While the surrealist movement provided many theoretical affirmations of its investigations in its many manifestos throughout the 1920s and 30s, Benjamin restricts his investigation of surrealism to a particular literary form which was developed pre-eminently by Louis Aragon and André Breton, namely the 'experiential document.' Benjamin suggests that for

> anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle [the surrealists] are not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature—will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories, and still less with phantasms (SW 2.1, 208)

The surrealist experiential document, exemplified by works such as André Breton's *Nadja* and Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, is not a piece of theory or fantasy. It is a demonstration or watchword of a certain moment of experience that is attained by the movement of "the 'poetic life' to the utmost limits of possibility." Like Monsieur G's lithographs, which bring to visibility an ephemeral moment, the fragmentary surrealist 'experiential document' concretizes an experience of that which flees with the same urgency of a dream upon waking.

"The Peasant's Dream" is the final section of Aragon's 1926 surrealist novel *Paris Peasant.* This section, which is referred to by commentator Simon Taylor as a 'corrective' or explanatory reflection (PP, x) provides Aragon's readers with an account of the basis of the 'experiential documents' that fill the first two sections of this work. "The Peasant's Dream" stands in relation to the 'experiential document' in the same way Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" does to the lithographs of Monsieur G. Consequently, this section offers a

number of fertile avenues for the understanding and unfurling of Aragon's thought.

In the introduction to his corrective Aragon maintains that:

> the world exists in a state of unthinkable disorder: the extraordinary thing about this is that men should have habitually sought beneath the surface appearance of disorder for some mysterious order, one that comes naturally to them, that merely expresses an innate desire within them, and they have no sooner introduced this order into things than they start going into raptures about it, making this order the basis of an idea, or alternatively explaining this order by an idea. (PP, 190)

Of foremost importance in the above selection is the suggestion that the world challenges us with an "unthinkable disorder" that "man" habitually shrinks from. Aragon's example seeks to emphasize the extent to which everyday habits of cognition ultimately disappoint in the face of the myriad potential ways in which the world might be encountered. Aragon's 'men' constantly understand their unthinkably disordered world through a number of inadequate and ultimately unfounded ordering principles. Like the contemporary Bourgeois individual who meets the singular object 'table' with an allegorical reduction to exchange value, Aragon's 'men' meet the difference of the world with their own understandings. Further, the formulations they settle upon present themselves as necessary. Yet according to Aragon these feelings of necessity are merely mechanisms through which the underlying contingency of their categories of understanding are concealed. Necessity is the paralyzing supplement to any contingent ordering principle that obscures and ultimately cushions against any confrontation with the "unthinkable disorder" which is the essence of the actual world.

Aragon effectively articulates a dualistic ontology. On the one hand there exists "unthinkable disorder," a realm of being that resists and rejects every attempt at being thought, and on the other there are inadequate attempts to reify this "unthinkable disorder" into coherent structures of meaning. The realm of material is at once irreparably separated from the realm of meaning and cognition, while at the same defined as its locus. André

Breton writes in the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" that "[i]f in a cluster of grapes there are no two alike, why do you want me to describe this grape by the other, by all the others, why do you want me to make a palatable grape? Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable" (MS, 9). The grape in this example is at once the site of 'palatable' amalgamations of taxonomic meaning, but also the site that resists appropriation and cognition.

The challenge for the 'thinking man' Aragon goes on to suggest, is to somehow sustain the unthinkable disorder in his experience of the world, to retain the un-re-presentable singularity of all encounters. Aragon writes that "for the thinking man who does not obscure his ideal perception by the constant control and cross-checking of each moment of his thought [...] for such a man disorder is capable of achieving transition to a concrete state" (PP, 191). But, yet again we are confronted with a paradox. The image of the unthinkable, sustained by a particular individual at a particular time, like Benjamin's notion of happiness, "is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us." The image of disorder, which is always formed in distinction from images of order, is understood only within the horizon of a particular time and place. The pursuit of a concrete "unthinkable disorder" is a continuous process of self-negation and transcendence. Aragon recognizes this when, through a slight modification of an old mythological story, he suggests that "there is no rest for Sisyphus, but his stone does not roll down again, it ascends and must not cease to ascend" (PP, 196).

The very form of the majority of Aragon's *Paris Peasant* reflects this renewed pursuit of the concrete-as-disorder. According to his later autobiographic reflections, Aragon suggests that *Paris Peasant* is a "novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of fiction, one that would be neither a narrative (a story) nor a character study (a

portrait)" (PP, xi). In a sense, it is a novel that attempts to write from the position of the surrealist ontology of "unthinkable disorder" (PP, 190). In the place of conventional narrative structures, that might offer unified and persistent images of places, characters and events—and thus yoke the unthinkable disorder of the world to different ordering principles—Aragon offers his readers a number of tenuously connected sketches of what can be termed 'surrealist experiences' which unfold again and again in the streets and arcades of Paris. In opposition to what André Breton terms the "realistic attitude" toward fiction in his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), where things, people, and places can be described according to permanent and essential natures, Aragon negates coherent geography in favour of a narrative perspective that moves at once listlessly, and then impassionedly, through a world that layers places onto other places, and times onto other times. Aragon favours the immanent description, the poetic image that presents itself in a flash before receding into the stratified sediment of past reflections and past insights. Benjamin, in his essay on surrealism, suggests that Breton, but also implicitly Aragon, were "the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"—in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest of photos, objects that have begun to be extinct" (SW2, 210). Aragon's narrative strives to give voice to the singularity that is proper to these materials—iron constructions, early photos—which are otherwise understood through the category of the outmoded.

In one of the many illustrative passages of *Paris Peasant*, and one of the most famous 'experiential documents' of the entire work, Aragon's narrator describes his encounters with the objects that populate the arcades of Paris. The arcade is a dialectical setting. As a principal site of cosmopolitan consumerism, it bears witness to a flattened and impoverished dimension of modern experience in which materiality is reduced to pragmatic exchange

values. At the same time it is also the site of the consumer fetish in all of its intoxicating depth. As the time and space of Parisian fashion it attests to the succession of time on the one hand, and the timelessness of the fetish object on the other. Aragon's narrator gives account of his experience of this space, elevating the latent experiential qualities of the fetish experience of space into a poetical transformation of time and space. After finishing several drinks at a nearby café, Aragon's narrator walks off into the passage. Aragon continues:

> By that time the lights had already been switched off. My attention was suddenly attracted to a sort of humming noise which seemed to be coming from the direction of the cane shop, and I was astonished to see that its window was bathed in a greenish, almost submarine light, the source of which became invisible. It was the same kind of phosphorescence that, I remember, emanated from the fish I watched, as a child, from the jetty of Port Bail on the Cotentin peninsula; but still, I had to admit to myself that even though the canes might conceivably possess the illuminating properties of creatures of the deep, a physical explanation would still scarcely account for this supernatural gleam and, above all, the noise whose low throbbing echoed back from the arched roof. I recognized the sound: it was the same voice of the seashells that has never ceased to amaze poets and film stars. The whole ocean in the Passage de l'Opéra. The canes floated gently like seaweed. (PP, 21-22)

In Aragon's experiential account, the material object that is inscribed within the order of capital is seen anew. The unacknowledged or repressed dialectical tensions which underpin modern experience are brought to ecstatic expression. The singular encounter between the narrator and his environment invokes correspondences that overwhelm him with overlaid images of childhood. In the moment of illumination, objects are freed of their existence within geometric coordinates and successive moments. The narrator of *Paris Peasant* encounters an eternal time through the sound of the seashell which bridges the ancient and modern. Inviolable spatial principles are violated in the experience of the whole ocean in the "Passage de l'Opéra." Benjamin's emphatic assertion that surrealist literature should not be relegated to fiction, but should be understood as demonstrations and watchwords suggests that these spans of time are reflective of modern ecstatic experience. These indigestible

illuminations resist Kantian interpretations of experience, and leave open the possibility of unique reconfigurations of sensibility.

Benjamin writes in his essay on surrealism that "to say nothing of Aragon's *Passage de l'Opéra*, Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys [...] on godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian neighborhoods of great cities [...] into revolutionary experience, if not action" (SW 2, 210). Aragon's narrative is replete with these correspondences and revelations. The moment of longing is arrested in Aragon's *Paris Peasant.* Before this moment of insight or feeling can be "cross-checked" against "all the preceding moments" of his life, before it can be understood within a general economy of emotional equilibrium, it is isolated and left in the open air where it unsettles and challenges literary realism's attempts to cover it over. Each of these experiences gives a brief, albeit fleeting, insight into the different ways in which the world can be constituted. Later Aragon will write that "most images are registered so weakly by the mind employing them that they incarnate absolutely no estimation of reality" (PP, 201). Yet by seizing these weak and fleeting images, and recording them, Aragon invites his readers to perform the same operation.

Aragon's 'experiences' are not speculative musings. They are not theories, insofar as *theōria* is the art of articulating the ordering principles of the world, of articulating an eagle-eye view. Where theory is the domain of the universal, the domain of the surrealist experience is a particular that confounds universality. The surrealist document is a trace or recording that gives voice to the muted language of things.

Benjamin suggests that "it is a cardinal error to believe that, of 'surrealist experiences,' we know only the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs" (SW 2, 209). This is an important point, and it suggests another way in which Aragon's experiential documents

function. While Aragon's writings can, on one level, be understood in their revolutionary potential within the context of their execution and recording—the revelation of the whole ocean in the *Passage de l'Opéra* is that moment that confounds the surrounding value laden Bourgeois object-image of materiality—Aragon's writings also function as a litmus test for his readers. In the *Passage de l'Opéra* we are tempted to reductively interpret Aragon's experiences as those of a drunk, or else a mystic. These are categories that re-inscribe the surreal experience within a traditional—and reactionary—economy of experience. To understand the illuminations that populate Aragon's text as symptoms, brought on merely by some intoxication—in distinction from the detoxified order of regular experience—we evade a confrontation with the extent to which our own experience rests on discontinuity and revelatory moments. We privilege, in that interpretive gesture, the voice that suggests that a moment of longing on a train is merely a function of distance or the stale air in the compartment. In understanding 'surrealist experience' as a drug-induced ecstasy, we yoke the particular to a historically contingent category of understanding.

The surrealist 'experiential document' reprises the form of Monsieur G's lithograph, but develops the flash of insight or 'profane illumination' into an indigestible fragment. While the particular cut of a dress, inscribed on a lithographic plate by Monsieur G., might not evoke a 'shock effect' in the Bourgeois subject, the surrealist illumination, through the magic of the idiosyncratic languages it uncovers, polemically interrupts the position of the reader, opening them to the possibility of a redeemed relationship to language and meaning.

2.5 On 'Historical Materialist Experience' in Walter Benjamin

Benjamin's historical materialism, like Aragon's theory of surreal experience, is a theory of experience which seeks to interrupt prescribed modes of constituting the materiality of the

present into meaning. Anticipated in his early theoretical writings such as "On the Coming Philosophy" and "On Language as Such," Benjamin's mature work develops his initial impulses into far reaching critical reflections on culture and history. This is intimated in his reflections on surrealism, and borne out through an attentive overview of his writings from the 1930s. Echoing Baudelaire's contestation of Bourgeois manners of relating to art, Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" seeks to identify the possibility of new social modes of perception which arise from technological developments in art production. Caygill compellingly argues in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* that one of Benjamin's main objectives in the first draft of his mechanical reproduction essay is to challenge the rhetoric of the 'authenticity' and 'uniqueness' through which artworks were evaluated by his contemporaries. Caygill's interpretation suggests that according to Benjamin the values of "uniqueness, genius and eternal validity" which were inherited by contemporaneous art historians are not universal values of artworks, but rather inherited values from an older tradition. According to Benjamin the Ancient Greeks developed these values as 'compensatory mechanisms' in response to their technologically limited capacity to reproduce and modify completed artworks. A marble statue, for instance, affords little or no modification once it is completed. In a powerful inversion of the deficiencies of their art forms, the Ancient Greeks made the flaws of their artworks—necessity, singularity and fixity—into virtues instead. The Ancient Greek artwork, which cannot respond to future cultural eventualities, is perversely celebrated for its fixity. Benjamin poses these materially determined values against modern art-mediums, such as film-making, or implicitly the lithograph, which lend themselves to transformation according to new social forces, demonstrating the historical contingency of approaches to art criticism, and signalling a redemptive potential in current technologies. Benjamin thus polemically challenges his

contemporaries to champion the potentially indeterminate contemporary art-work instead of disavowing it. Modern artwork, according to Benjamin's critique of the tradition, should strive toward adequacy with the, to quote Baudelaire, "relative, circumstantial elements" of experience. It is further enjoined to distribute these experiences to a mass audience, like the lithographs of Monsieur G, or the experiential documents of the surrealists. Benjamin writes that "[t]he adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception" (CE, 103).

Likewise, Benjamin's 1937 essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" elaborates this critique of the cannon of formal legitimacy into a critique of historical research as such. The essay maintains that Eduard Fuchs, a nineteenth century "collector who strayed into marginal areas—such as caricature and pornographic imagery" (SW3, 268) is an exemplary art historian. In the essay Benjamin praises Fuchs' capacity to extend the scope of 'art' to marginalized practices of representation. Much like Baudelaire's Monsieur G, who employs a definite technology of representation to bring an unexplored field of experience into public visibility, Benjamin's Eduard Fuchs pioneered a materialistic consideration of art by producing history books illustrated with archival works—"documentary pictures"—as opposed to illustrations "by living artists" which would otherwise impose a contemporary inflection, or way of seeing, on the past (SW3, 264). Fuchs is, according to Benjamin, the "pioneer of a materialistic consideration of art" (SW3, 261).

Benjamin's celebration of Eduard Fuchs is pre-empted in his analysis of André Breton in "Surrealism." According to the surrealism essay, Breton possessed an exceptional capacity to "bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere'" concealed in the 'outmoded' "to the point of explosion" (SW2, 210). Benjamin writes that the "first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct," all pieces of material culture that are forced

out of expression in language, and therefore forced out of cognition by the course of history, are the very pieces of culture Breton seeks to integrate into the fold of his research. Breton's capacity to interrupt the procession of history and redeem the 'outmoded' is celebrated by Benjamin not only because it brushes against the grain of voguish capitalism, but more importantly because it suggests other ways in which culture can be re-constituted. Breton, Fuchs, and modern technologies of art, all possess the capacity to stir moments of cultural reflection on the contingency of any mode of cognition. The universalizing language of art history, and the cultural language of the new, are confronted by these figures. A materialist history of caricature, a poetically modulated engagement with the unwieldy 'things' of history are positioned in their place, furnishing the conditions of the possibility of the "Philosophy of the Future."

Benjamin's varied responses to the work of Baudelaire and the surrealists—including his explicit critiques of their methods as well as his independent explorations of coincident themes—attain their most concentrated expression in Benjamin's final work, the theses "On the Concept of History." The principle object of the theses on history is to develop a reflection on the tension between a revolutionary 'materialist history' and the reactionary tradition of monolithic nineteenth century 'historicism.' Historicism, a philosophy of history epitomized, according to Benjamin, by Leopold von Ranke, suggests that the events of the past can be ordered according to an "'eternal' image of the past" (SW4, 396). Benjamin writes that "historicism rightly culminates in universal history. [...] Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time" (SW4, 396). Instead of striving to apprehend the different vantage points from which, for instance, the 'outmoded' iron bridge could appear rich with life again, the historicist instead strives to add examples that fortify his existing image of the

past. The materiality on which he bases his narrative of history is not encountered in its singularity, but rather its singularity is subordinated to the "eternal" image. The methodology of universal history does not admit the possibility of a 'madeleine,' or any other object which might threaten to reconfigures the coordinates of its image of the past.

In marked contrast to historicism, Benjamin attempts to elaborate a philosophy of history that strives to adequately meet the disparate singularities that make up the substance of history. Benjamin writes:

> Materialist historiography [...] is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. [...] in this structure he [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (SW 4, 396)

Benjamin's elaboration of the task of historical materialism recalls Aragon's attempts to seize and presence those fleeting images that appeared to him on the streets of Paris. The task of the historical materialist is to somehow rupture the narrative of things lost to history for long enough that the monadological singularity or better – the singular language of the things of historical research – can present itself again. By pursuing these singular encounters with the material on which history is formed, Benjamin's ideal historian strives to redeem possibilities forced out of the present. In the space of an instant the oppression of the past lifts. In a moment of 'profane illumination' the historical materialist, like the surrealist, understands an altogether new way of constituting the materiality of the world into images and thoughts. The historical materialist, like the surrealist or painter of modern life attempts to attain a relation to material culture that is faithful to the ephemeral.

By describing the theoretical task that sustains historical materialist history in "On the Concept of History," Benjamin implies at once that history can be written, that historical

documents are producible, and that revolutionary historical experience is possible. This ultimately raises the question of how historical materialist writing might look. Historical writing is conventionally understood according to structures of narrative. Yet narrative history sustains the monological principles of historicism. It attempts to explain a series of events according to a governing thematic principle that is ultimately grounded in the present. History for Benjamin does not subordinate the singularity of its diverse materiality to a single mode of cognition. History is made from discontinuous fractured revelations that constellate difference rather than eternal sameness. How would such a writing look, and how might it address the threat of lapsing into narrative history?

Ultimately, I believe it's fruitful to consider the possibility that the form of the 'experiential document' that is advanced in surrealist writing might be the proper form of a nascent historical materialist history. When Benjamin describes the surrealist documents of experience as "not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature" which are concerned "literally with experiences, not with theories, and still less with phantasms" (SW 2.1, 208) Benjamin might as well describe his own documentations of historical experience. Just as the surrealist experiential document records the trace of a moment of profane illumination, the document of historical materialism should testify to a historical illumination. The historical materialist document should disrupt the continuity of the present with an experience of the claim of the past.

Thus, we can say that Benjamin's 1931 essay "Unpacking my Library," written just two years after "Surrealism," and in the midst of his affiliation with the French surrealist circle, offers the sketches of such an account. It is important to emphasize at the outset of our analysis that the essay, while subtitled "A Talk about Book Collecting," does not offer any

explicit recommendations regarding book collecting. Further, the essay does not seek to develop the collector's relation to the narratives which are contained in the pages of his collection, but rather the collector's relation to the material history of the books-as-objects. The essay is about book collecting, not story or literature collecting.

The collector, in the tradition of Baudelaire's typologies, is a figure who attends rather compulsively to the acquisition of the objects of his chosen field. While it might ask too much to suggest that Monsieur G. and Louis Aragon are *collectors* of the ephemeral, there is a preliminary affinity between the character type of the collector and their work. The collector's collection is also notable because, while a governing theme might foreground the orientation of a collection, this theme does not subordinate the objects of the collection. The collected objects, while ordered and organized, are preserved in their singularity. The task of articulating a body of historical materialist research, while attempting to resist the tendency toward historicism in the overwhelming majority of attempts to encompass the past might find an appropriate home in the activity and methods of the collector.

Benjamin concretizes these suggestions in writing that "the acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone" (IL, 63). The book collector is more than a wise investor, or an obsessive cataloguer. The collector is attuned to the singular material provenances that make up his collection. Benjamin writes that the collector is engaged in "a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate" (IL, 60). The material histories of books are irreducible combinations of the histories of their acquisitions, disappearances, and fabrications. For Benjamin it is not even important to have read the books. Their value lies rather in their capacity to inspire us to contemplation of long forgotten people, subterranean literary traditions, and oppressed pasts. Benjamin

writes "how many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in pursuit of books!" (IL, 63). Each piece of the collector's collection, can, in a moment of appropriate contemplation, recall and evoke the now absent histories of the collector's own life. Just as Aragon's narrator in Paris Peasant brings the atmosphere latent in outmoded things to the point of explosion, the collector, in moments of illumination, can presence the depth of material histories. Appropriately Benjamin writes "one has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into the distant past as though inspired" (IL, 61).

While "Unpacking my Library" serves to foreground the relation between the collector and the surrealist or painter of modern life, the essay also crosses over into the territory of the experiential document. Benjamin begins the essay in the present tense, narrating the moment of uncovering the material of his book collection after two years of storage. The tone is jarring and unconventional. He writes:

> I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am. The books are not yet on the shelves, not yet touched by the mild boredom of order. I cannot march up and down their ranks to pass them in review before a friendly audience. You need not fear any of that. Instead, I must ask you to join me in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, the floor covered with torn paper, to join me among piles of volumes that are seeing daylight again after two years of darkness, so that you may be ready to share with me a bit of the mood" (IL, 59)

Benjamin signals that he, a book collector himself, is conjuring the 'mood' or particular spirit in which these long sealed material artefacts might come to life again, for himself and for his readers. Among the disorder of the open crates, Benjamin is confronted with histories of his own life he has forgotten. Benjamin suggests that once these books are placed back on the shelves they will settle into a mild boredom of order, just as the site of Aragon's *Passage de l'Opéra* might appear, after his experience, as the banal site of cane shops and everyday transactions. Yet for the brief span of time Benjamin seeks to document in this essay, these

objects evoke forgotten histories and disclose a mode of relating to materiality that is oppressed by the present. By recording this span of time, Benjamin sustains the openness of those fleeting insights which conventionally 'flit by.'

Benjamin's mood evolves as he works through his task. As he draws new books out from their storage, he recalls scenes from his life that have been buried. In the spirit of Proust's *madeleine* which presences heretofore inaccessible histories, Benjamin is transported to times and places he is estranged from. He describes that he is:

> on the last half-emptied crate, and it is way past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than the ones I am talking about—not thoughts but images, memories. Memories of the cities in which I found so many things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris; memories of Rosenthal's sumptuous rooms in Munich, of the Danzig Stockturm, where the late Hans Rhaue was domiciled, of Sussengut's musty book cellar in North Berlin [...] and finally of my boyhood room, the former location of only four or five of the several thousand volumes that are piled up around me. (SW2, 492)

Benjamin's experience of the material substance of the collection connects him with the past and transforms his surroundings. The mild boredom of order disappears in the room while his objects come to life. Their material, which conventionally seems to end at their surface, discloses profound depth. Benjamin's collection is latent with immense stretches of time and whole cities of Europe.

Benjamin's experiential document is formally analogous to Aragon's surreal document. The essay on book collecting outlines the trace of a moment of insight that habit and convention seek to repress or negate. Further, it sustains the moment of its illumination through rendering it into language. Benjamin as book collector, like the surrealist poet, attempts to discover and circulate a moment of fractured human language which announces itself in the midst of the muted language of the world. He is led to his collection like any collector, by the auspicious confluence of profane resolution and ineluctable circumstance.

The insight of the book collector does not suffice to redeem human language, but it succeeds in manifesting the task.

Chapter 3: The Arcades Project, Judgement, and the Redemption of History

3.1 On The Arcades Project as the fulfilment of the Coming Philosophy

The object of this chapter, which serves in a way as a conclusion to this work, is to propose an interpretation of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* which situates the work as a fulfilment of what is suggested but postponed in his early theory on language and the coming philosophy. In distinction from Benjamin's middle period writings, which develop the conditions of redeemed language, the *Arcades Project* presents a concerted attempt to fulfill language. According to this interpretation, the *Arcades Project* is an incomplete—and very possibly uncompletable—methodologically unified attempt to unite trace linguistic fragments of the "unique and temporally limited" moments of French cultural history in the nineteenth century into a montage-language which is open to the arrival of the purity of the 'judging word' which would restore the adequacy of the languages of man to their referential object, namely nineteenth century Paris.

According to Benjamin's philosophy of history, the material objects of culture have an explosive potential to reconfigure existing modes of sensibility. In lieu of developing a historical account of 'Paris in the 19th century' which would preserve a narrative voice, thus substituting one moment of historically configured language for another, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* curates a collection of *madeleines* of French history. Echoing the methodology of Benjamin's essay "On Unpacking my Library" the *Arcades Project* collects citations so that they can 'speak for themselves.' Adorno wrote in his portrait of Benjamin that in the latter' theoretical system "subjective intention is seen to be extinguished in the [encounter with the]

object" and that "Benjamin's thought is not content with intentions" (PR, 239). Through a process of accumulating material-linguistic fragments that is guided at once by critical intention and chance encounters, Benjamin develops a unified body of historical materialist research that strives toward adequacy with its object and gestures toward the possibility of the fulfilment of the Kantian theory of knowledge.

3.2 On the Angel of History, Accumulation and Redemption

As the previous two chapters have attempted to demonstrate, Benjamin's early essays "On Language as Such" and "On the Coming Philosophy" signal the task of the future philosophy as one of somehow redeeming the Kantian project to develop a transcendental consciousness in light of the question of ephemeral experience and the languages of man. Benjamin's essays posit a theologically determined prelapsarian past in which human names once held adequacy to the things of the world and a coming philosophy in which the clarity and justification of the Kantian program might again find adequacy to ephemeral experience in a purified "transcendental / epistemological consciousness." Benjamin's middle period writings develop the conditions of the possibility of this coming philosophy in their concerted attempt to contest dominant social modes of cognizing ephemeral experience. In his appropriation of the techniques of Baudelaire and the surrealists, Benjamin attempts to facilitate a social recognition of the constitutive structure of experience, namely as that which is discontinuous and populated by myriad ephemeral experiences. The surrealist "magical experiments with words" or the lithographs of Monsieur G. make explicit the discontinuities, be they in the conception of beauty or the conception of the outmoded, which structure the present. In facilitating flashes of 'profane illumination' these early twentieth century

revolutionaries shore up the dreamlike instability of the present. To this end, Adorno, who might have had a more privileged access to the theoretical underpinnings of Benjamin's writings than anyone else, writes in "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" that "[i]t is not [Benjamin's] glance as such which lays claim to the unmediated possession of the absolute; rather [in] his manner of seeing, the entire perspective is altered. *The technique of enlargement brings the rigid in motion and the dynamic to rest.*" Adorno continues to suggest that Benjamin's writings attend to "small or shabby objects like dust and plush" which are "a complement of this technique, drawn as it is to everything that has slipped through the conventional conceptual net or to things which have been esteemed too trivial by the prevailing spirit for it to have left any traces other than those of hasty judgement" (PB, 239). Benjamin's manner of seeing, which is analogous to that of the surrealists, enlarges the 'small or shabby' object and, in so doing invests it with new life. This manner of seeing challenges the norms of cognition that sustain mass cultural understandings of materiality and in a revelatory flash invokes the contingency that underpins all presents.

In spite of Benjamin's middle period writings, which celebrate those collections of the inassimilable that mark the discontinuity of the present, there is little indication of the progress of the historical materialist project toward the fulfilment of the coming philosophy. The time of judgement, in which the totality of ephemeral experience is sublimated into the 'objective experience' which is suggested as the condition of possibility of the coming philosophy, is suspended until a later time. In light of Benjamin's attempt to neutralize the categories of 'subject' and 'object,' the ethical task of 'judging' or sifting through the revealed languages of humanity does not present any clear means of arresting the accumulation of knowledge of the discontinuous languages of humanity. The middle period works are concerned with the facilitation of the recognition of the proliferation of language and name.

The historical materialist philosopher who emerges from Benjamin's early and middle works is in many ways like Klee's *Angelus Novus*. The angel of history, according to Benjamin's ninth thesis "On the Concept of History," has his face "turned towards the past." He is situated so that "he seems to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, and his wings are spread." The angel of history sees history as it is[10]. Benjamin writes:

> [w]here a chain of events appears before *us, he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. (SW4, 392)

Like the angel of history, the historical materialist has a privileged insight into the 'catastrophic' accumulation which comprises all that has been. His philosophical adversaries—historicists and Kantian subjects—generalize their moment of 'unique and temporally limited' experience into a model of history or consciousness as-such which presents them with an image of history or consciousness which forms a unified 'chain of events.' In distinction from these models, the historical materialist's moments of 'profane illumination' awaken in him a recognition of the languages of humanity. These rise up in their diversity to form a pile of wreckage at his feet. In Benjamin's characterization of the angel of history, he emphasizes that his movement into the future is driven by the winds which blow from paradise. The accumulating wreckage, the movement of time and history, result from the moment of rupture which marks the severance of the perfect adequacy of human names to things. In spite of all of the angel's insight, Benjamin maintains that he cannot arrest his own movement. The angel would like to *stay* and transform his insight into

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[10] Benjamin writes in Convolute N of his *Arcades Project* that "To write history ... means to cite history" [N11,3].

knowledge which might awaken the dead or "make whole what has been smashed," but before any such application is possible he is swept away by the postlapsarian storm.

The angel of history is characterized in the fragment by three physical attributes: spread wings, open eyes, and an open mouth. Interpreting his figure symbolically, the angel's wings are the markers of his exception. The angel's status in the classical chain of ontological determination, somewhere between humanity and divinity, elevates him above common humanity and endows him with a capacity to perceive the true unfolding of history. But the very wings that mark his superhuman position are also the very anatomy by which he is swept forward. The storm from paradise "has got caught in his wings" and he cannot close them. The angel is cursed in his blessedness. His insight into the constitution of history does not yield a resolution of his movement but seems to further it. Likewise, the insights of the historical materialist do not yield an absolute or finished system, but rather proliferate his struggle.

The angel's face is characterized by open eyes and open mouth. His open eyes signify his ceaseless attention to the accumulation of the catastrophe of history. The open eyes of the angel are exceptionally attuned to the light of profane illumination. They evoke Baudelaire's aesthetic hero who can integrate an appreciation of the minor works of art history into his aesthetic engagement, or the surrealists who, in their finer moments elevate 'unthinkable disorder' to the status of the concrete.

His open mouth is altogether more ambiguous in its significations. It could very well signify an astonished and speechless mouth that is rendered mute in the face of the catastrophe of the past. The open mouth of the angel of history would then be the sign of his witness to unspeakable horror. Or it might well be the sign of a mouth in speech, enunciating all that it sees: a mouth which facilitates the recognition of the accumulating

catastrophe, a mouth which attempts to speak in the myriad languages of humanity. Finally, the open mouth could signify a waiting, a suspension of the pronouncement of name until that time of judgement when naming will be restored to its perfect commensurability with things. The angel's mouth is speechless, not from the impossibility of speech, but in its patience. The mouth is open because it is poised like a sprinter on a starting block, ready for a gunshot to announce the time of the arrival of the possibility of the pure and felicitous name.

In support of the third interpretation, Benjamin writes in the fragment B of his "Theses on History"

> [w]e know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanted the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter. (SW4, 397)

The Torah's injunction to remembrance and its implicit prohibition against attention to the future is evocative of the temporal alignment of *Angelus Novus*. The pious Jew stands with his back to the future, and his eyes trained on the past. His temporal orientation is identical to that of the angel of history. Beyond this initial affinity, Benjamin's suggestion that the site of the return of the messiah is a "small gateway" suggests affinities with the open mouth of the angel of history. Harry Zohn renders the German phrase "die kleine Pforte" as 'small gateway' in his above-cited translation, though it could just as well be rendered as portal, opening, or doorway. The mouth is the portal through which names are spoken onto the world. It would be appropriate to entertain the possibility that messiah might return through the open mouth, in the fulfilment of the unformed speech of the angel of history. As Benjamin's third thesis suggests, the day of judgement is that time in which the past would "become citable in all its moments" (SW4, 390). The day of judgement is that day in which

the 'accumulating catastrophe' would be citable through its pure name. The return of the messiah would be the moment when the movement of the angel of history stops—when through the angel's mouth the names of the objects before him are pronounced according to their prelapsarian dignity.

With respect to Benjamin's historical materialism, the above images provide a fertile ground for collecting Benjamin's reflections on the ethical ambiguity of the historical materialist's orientation to his task. Benjamin's early goal of 'neutralizing' the concepts of subject and object was shown to complicate the question of judgement. According to the essay on language "[i]n the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose" (SW1, 71). The judging word promises the possibility of arbitrating between the languages of humanity, but the judging word is not reducible to volitional utterances of the subject. It is dialectically structured between the divine activity of God and the profane military officer's *citation à l'ordre du jour.* The *profane* judging word is spoken onto the collected and reported events of the day, while the *divine* judging word, which has yet to pronounce itself onto the world, will take up the events of *all* that has passed. Likewise, Benjamin's essay "On the Coming Philosophy" emphasizes that *for us* "an objective relation between the empirical consciousness and the objective concept of experience is impossible" (SW1, 104). Human reflection on the moments of empirical consciousness cannot accomplish the sublation of empirical consciousness into objective consciousness. The transformation is deferred to a 'coming' time which is pregnant with the possibility of its resolution. The tasks of the historical materialist philosopher, defined as the formulation of objective consciousness and the restoration of language, are not manifestly accomplished in his work. His mouth remains open, anticipating the moment when name might be redeemed.

This is not to suggest that the necessity of a messianic supplement to the work of the present absolves the historical materialist of her responsibility to her work. Her work is fuelled by an ineluctable responsibility to the claim of materiality on the present. Thus the angel, or the historical materialist, cannot 'close his wings' or resign herself from the obligations entailed by her insight. Adorno suggests as much when he writes:

> Benjamin's intention [with the *Arcades Project*] was to eliminate all overt commentary and to have the meanings [of the text] emerge solely through a shocking montage of the material. His aim was not merely for philosophy to catch up to surrealism, but for it to become surrealistic. In *One-Way Street* he wrote that citations from his works were like highwaymen, who suddenly descend on the reader to rob him of his convictions. He meant this literally. The culmination of his anti-subjectivism, his major work was to consist solely of citations. (PB, 238)

Like the pious Jew or the angel of history, the collector of historical fragments amasses with her eyes trained exclusively on the past. Historical materialist research cannot proceed according to a teleological structure, or it risks the possibility of subordinating its material encounters to 'wishes' and expectations of the present. The historical materialist suspends grand narratives of historicism and progress in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the profane illuminations, which populate her work. Benjamin's historical materialist project is an archive of material fragments that are lodged within a particular surreal manner of perception, charged with the rupturing potential of the *madeleine*. Benjamin aspires to compose a montage of material that would somehow disrupt the convictions of interpretation which guide his readers to their engagement with the work itself. The fragment as 'highwayman' disrupts the subject from without, and in so doing undermines the self determination which is critical to any theory of the subject. It is out of these considerations that the methodological underpinnings of the *Arcades Project* begin to emerge.

3.3 On the Genesis of the Arcades Project

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is a vast and uncompleted work. According to Rolf Tiedemann's essay "Dialectics at a Standstill: *Approaches to the Passagen-Werk,*" the genesis of the *Arcades Project* can be roughly localized in the late 1920s. In 1926 Benjamin paid his first visit to Paris (AP, 930) and began his storied engagement with the surrealists, whose 'experiential documents' provided him with the initial inspiration for the citational structure of the work (AP, 933). The project was intended to culminate in a short philosophical and historical essay on Paris in the nineteenth century (AP, 930), where following from the surrealists, the work would eschew conventional narrative histories and instead develop from citations and fragmentary criticism. The generative influences in the project are contested, but commentator Stathis Gourgouris suggests in his 2003 essay on the *Arcades Project* "The Dream-Reality of the Ruin" that the structure of the work is directly indebted to Freud, Brecht, and the surrealists (WBAP, 207). Likewise, Susan Buck-Morss suggests in her 1989 *Dialectics at a Standstill* that the work "merges elements of Surrealism and Proust, Marx and Freud, with those of historical generations and childhood cognition in a blend that is bound together more by literary than logical means" (DS, 253).

In the development of these influences Benjamin compiled an array of quotations organized according to distinct topics such as the Arcades, Daguerre and the World Exhibition and condensed them into a handful of subheadings. The first of these drafts was submitted in 1935 to the Institut für Sozialforschung, under the title "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" to secure funding for the remainder of the project.

According to Tiedemann, these initial essays give only a small glimpse of Benjamin's overall project, which Benjamin developed until his untimely death in 1940. Barring the

second extended draft of his initial essay, which he submitted in 1939 to Max Horkheimer with the hope of securing an American benefactor, Benjamin continued to collect fragments for his *Arcades Project* with the aim of composing them into a concrete text. A work that began with an attempt to draw a limited range of fragments and citations together into an essay length collection ultimately unfolded into a sprawling collection which Tiedemann suggests "would have been nothing less than a materialist philosophy of the history of the nineteenth century" (AP, 929). All told, the final iteration of the *Arcades Project* organizes thousands of quotations into thirty-six 'Convolutes,' which together span close to nine hundred total pages in print. The sections cover topics as diverse as arcades, the collector, iron construction, mirrors, Marx, prostitution and modes of modern lighting. The citations are derived from 'high' and 'low' culture. They include snippets of advertisements, economic statistics, quotations from Baudelaire and the "International Association of Workers." The citations are interspersed with Benjamin's commentaries, which come to dominate certain Convolutes and which are almost entirely absent from others.

The work as it stands today, conveniently bound in by Harvard university's Belknap Press, gives a sense of cohesion to the project that far outstrips whatever actual character the work attained in Benjamin's life. Like the majority of Benjamin's recently published writings, the *Arcades Project* was unpublished at the time of his death. With the exception of several sections from Benjamin's 'Convolute' pertaining to the theory of knowledge and progress—which were reworked into his reflections on Fuchs and his theses on history—and his 'Convolute' addressing Baudelaire, the work was conducted in private and remained in private. While Benjamin gave some indication of its development to close friends, there is little critical consensus regarding the question of whether it was ultimately developed toward the possibility of publication.

Benjamin fled Paris in 1939 as Europe erupted into war. His private 'project' was entrusted, among other writings, to Georges Bataille who hid them in the basement of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The works were recovered after the war and as Benjamin rose to posthumous prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century a team of researchers chaired by Tiedemann compiled the diverse materials of Benjamin's unfinished archive into a publication of the project under its original title, the *Passagen-Werk*, in 1982. In distinction from the rest of Benjamin's collected works, which were organized chronologically, Tiedemann made the editorial decision to assert an organization that was faithful to Benjamin's thematic organization of the fragments of the project into topical folders. The order of the folders in its current published form is only speculatively deduced from prior sketches of the structure of the project.

In light of the storied editorial history of the *Arcades Project* it would be foolhardy to approach the text as a completed document. As Gourgouris has emphasized,

> "[r]eading Walter Benjamin's Passagen-Werk means confronting the obdurate question of how one becomes – and what it means to become – the reader of an imaginary text. [...] the urgency and difficulty of the question concerns the construction of a reading position in regard to a work that never ceases being a project, resisting thus the present time of reading even after being fashioned into a printable text by a superior editor (Rolf Tiedemann), who self-consciously assumes the burden of enclosing an untamable project between two book covers. (WBAP, 201)

The *Arcades Project* is an imaginary work. In its present editorial configuration it is simply the imaginative reconstruction of a figure of what the *Arcades Project* might eventually have been, provided it was even developed towards some publishable end. It also accomplishes 'imaginary work' in unfolding the imaginative structures and languages of nineteenth century Paris. The *Arcades Project* is thus a *Passage-Work* insofar as it concerns the concretization of the fragments of 'ephemeral experience' which might have otherwise *passed* unregistered though nineteenth century Paris or twentieth century historical reflection.

The text cannot be approached as a completed project, but rather as a work that "never ceases being a project." As an object of theoretical interpretation then, we are left with the question of interpreting its directions and orientations. Unquestionably the work develops Benjamin's reflections on historical materialist considerations of culture. Insofar as Benjamin suggests that Fuchs "is the pioneer of a materialist consideration of art" (SW3, 261) because of his attempts to draw the marginalized artistic disciplines of 'pornographic imagery' and 'caricature' into the field of art history, we can conclude that Benjamin, in his integration of fleeting subjects such as gas-lamp-lighting and the *flâneur* into a sprawling program of historical research, becomes the historical materialist researcher par excellence. The incessant accumulation of the *Arcades Project* accompanies virtually all of his mature writings. But what guides his process of acquisition? Is it simply the claim that profane illumination makes on Benjamin? Is there any categorical difference between Benjamin's published historical materialist research in essays such as "One Way Street" or "Unpacking my Library" and the *Arcades Project?*

Benjamin writes in Convolute N—the section of the *Arcades Project* devoted to the "Theory of Knowledge and the Theory of Progress"—that the *Arcades Project* is developed from a method of "literary montage." Benjamin maintains "I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. [N1a,8]". Our reflections on the figure of the Angel of history suggest the possibility of an interpretation of what this 'making use' might entail. Benjamin makes use of the fragments of the *Arcades Project*, he collects the rags and refuse that escape monological historical research, towards the possibility of a redeemed knowledge, towards the possibility of the felicitous naming of the unnameable. Benjamin's work must remain a

work in progress until the coming time when the coordinates of profane judgement and divine judgement are united in the redemption of pure name. Benjamin does not 'finish' the *Arcades Project* because it methodologically does not give itself over to subjectively determined completion. The work succeeds in 'neutralizing' subject and object to the extent that it effaces authorial intention and the moment of decision, which would declare the work to be finished. Benjamin's eyes must remain open to the 'catastrophe' that is the unfolding of historical materialist research. His mouth remains open, as it is not for him to decide when name will be restored to human speech.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

From a distance the fragmentary and unresolved historical materialist program developed by Benjamin from the 1920s until his death in 1940 couldn't be farther removed from the systematic and rigorously explicative structure of the Kantian project. Where Kant offers concrete accounts of the anatomical structure of human knowledge and experience, Benjamin merely gestures towards the abstract requirements of a rigorously transcendental philosophy. Where Kant bequeaths the system as his legacy, Benjamin merely leaves books of notes and citations. Kant's legacy demands to be read as the labour of philosophy, whereas Benjamin's heritage, especially conceived through the *Arcades Project*, reads as the trace of organized circumstance.

Benjamin resolved in a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1917 to attempt to 'set in granite' and 'universally develop' the Kantian system (CB, 97). In concluding this project we affirm that the discrepancies between the literary and philosophical outputs of Kant and Benjamin recede under scrutiny. The differences do not mark a dissolute or unfulfilled break,

but rather mark Benjamin's appropriate stylistic response to the development of the spirit of the Kantian system.

In Kant Benjamin discovered an intellectual honesty which he took to be unique in the tradition. With the exception of Plato, Benjamin affirmed that Kant was the only figure in the history of philosophy to pursue clarity and justification for their own sake. The result of Kant's labours is a system of philosophy that drastically limits its scope. Compared with the 17th-century systems of metaphysics (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) which came before him, Kant's critical system appears to be minimalistic in its fundamental conclusions. It is as if Kant was the first thinker in the modern tradition to recognize the staggering demands which the question of truth announces. Kant's virtue is his pursuit of this truth. The clarity and justification which underpin his findings are the result. Yet Kant is not faithful to his own demands in every facet of his project. For all of Kant's efforts he continued to harbour contingent metaphysical assumptions, especially his presumption of subject-object causation, which barred him from an adequate confrontation with ephemeral experience.

Benjamin attempts to excise the concepts of subject and object from the Kantian system. But in doing so Benjamin challenges the very form of philosophy. The transcendental, which can be neatly defined within the Kantian conceptual framework, attains a fundamental ambiguity in a philosophy which rejects a clear cut distinction between subject and object. Benjamin's philosophy must overturn both the pre-Kantian orientation to the determination of objects and the Kantian orientation to the determination of the mechanics of subjectivity, while maintaining its fidelity to the pursuit of clarity and justification in its conclusions. Benjamin's thought excised the question of authorial intention or agency, a position which had a growing influence on western philosophy in the last half century. The result is a body of writings which cohere from the perspective of their

generative principle, but diverge in their specificity. Benjamin's concluding remark of "On the Coming Philosophy" maintains that "[e]xperience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" (SW1, 108). The historical materialist philosopher writes the truth of this experience. The works which result are functions of the multiplicity of knowing.

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